

Jinko Fuyuno

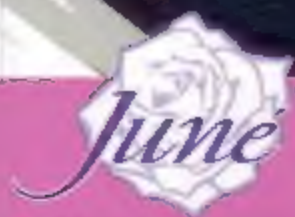
ふゆの仁子

Illustrated By

Noboru Takatsuki

タカツキノボル

All You Need Is Love.
愛しかいらねえよ。 vol. I



Yaoi



Novel

"Junya?" He raised his eyebrows, and his well-shaped lips pronounced this name, heavy with memories. The instant Sawa heard it, a shock like an electric current ran through his body. "Is that you?"

After eight years, Junya Sawa has never forgotten his first love.

It was in high school that he'd first met him: Uzuki Kobayakawa, son of a notorious yakuza boss. As a class representative, it had become Sawa's responsibility to help this intimidating young man adjust to his new school, where rumors about the gangster spread like wildfire. But as he got to know Kobayakawa, he discovered there was so much more to him than met the eye.

Now, after a chance meeting in Tokyo, Kobayakawa is thrust into Sawa's life once more. He's changed, of course, but Sawa can't deny his feelings, nor refuse Kobayakawa's erotic demands. But does Kobayaka feel the same way, and can he forgive Sawa for betraying him eight years ago?



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All You Need Is Love.
愛しかいらねえよ.
vol.I

Kobayakawa whispered at Sawa's ear as he began a powerful rhythm with his hips. The words were soft and clear, so Sawa would understand them.

All You Need Is Love. 愛しかいらねえよ。 Vol. I

Written by
JINKO FUYUNO

Illustrations by
NOBORU TAKATSUKI

English translation by
Karen McGillicuddy

Written By
JINKO FUYUNO
Birthday: October 10th
Zodiac Sign: Libra
Blood Type: A
Residence: Tokyo

I've been obsessed with the Q.P. company's commercial for their *tarako* mayonnaise. The one with the legion of Kewpie dolls all dressed in tarako costumes singing "tarako~, tarako~." I'll never forget the way it made me feel the first time I saw it.

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE VOL.1

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Illustrated by Noboru Takatsuki
English translation by Karen McGillicuddy

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All You Need Is Love

Chapter One

The intense sunlight beat down on his head. The asphalt that lay baking in the sun reflected the searing heat, cooking the humid air and wrapping a sweaty film around his entire body.

"It's so hot."

He wiped the sweat from his skin again and again, but there was always more. Junya Sawa knew there was nothing anyone could do about it, but he found himself complaining anyway. The thin fringe of his bangs stuck to his sweaty forehead uncomfortably. As he walked, he would occasionally catch sight of his reflection in windows and he gasped whenever he did.

This was his fourth year as a working man, but still he couldn't shake the impression that he was just playing dress-up in his suits. Part of that was surely due to his baby-faced looks. It was better now that it was summer, since he could wear lighter clothes, but in winter the heavy suits looked exaggerated on his thin body.

Ever since the rainy season had ended in mid-July, they'd been suffering a heat wave with a string of days over 95 degrees. The reporters were calling this year hotter than average. The night before had been sweltering, and Sawa had spent it in his room, which had no air conditioner. He felt as if he had gotten a taste of hell.

"I hope it doesn't get as hot where you're from as it does here in Tokyo, Sawa."

Kashima, his plump little boss, was walking beside him. He looked much, much hotter than Sawa. Sweat was pouring down his body. He was carrying his suit jacket over one arm and his shirt was so thoroughly soaked that his undershirt made a perfect outline in the fabric.

The stench of melting tar mingled with the stink of sweat. Sawa had to fight back the impulse to flee from the revolting mixture.

"It's not much better. Depending on where you go, it can actually be hotter."

"Are you serious?" Kashima's eyes widened in genuine surprise.

"It's two hours away by train. Some guys who live out there commute all the way into town."

"Two hours is definitely inside the commuter belt." He nodded, as if enlightened by Sawa's explanation.

"I was planning to commute from home, too, when I got hired. But when I heard the company offered housing allowances, I decided to get my own place."

After Sawa had graduated from his local state university with a degree in economics, his father's influence had gotten him a job at a regional bank. But after, he'd been thrown for a loop by the crashing waves of financial reorganization: last year, the regional bank merged with a major bank in the city and he had been forced to transfer into the city.

The scale of business was larger than it had been at the regional bank; they even did business with

the national Bank of Japan. The things he'd learned in college came back to him, and he began to feel challenged by his work at last.

His boss Kashima was a man cast in the old mold. He was obnoxious and all talk, and no one would have said he was particularly good at his job.

They had been brought together by circumstances to work on making the rounds to visit other companies for the time being, but Sawa felt inwardly relieved since they had already heard from upper management that his boss would be changing in early fall during the personnel transfers.

"Are you really living all by yourself?"

"I really am."

It bothered him how his boss got so nosy about his personal life whenever they went out together on a job. He had always asked Sawa about his time in college before, but now it seemed that his interest had migrated to the present day.

"I just figured that since you're so popular with the ladies, you'd be living with a girlfriend. But apparently not."

A loathsome grin crawled across Kashima's face. Sawa had been expecting this question to come eventually and he forced a toothy smile.

"I'm really not that popular."

"Don't be so modest. As soon as you transferred here, the girls at the bank couldn't talk about anything else."

"I was just a curiosity. Women don't seem to notice me much since I've got such a girlish baby face."

"I'm not sure about that. But anyway, once they find out you're available, I bet they'll kick up a big fuss."

Though Sawa gave Kashima an ambiguous smile, inside he was getting fed up. People came to work to do their job, not to find a husband or lover.

Sawa was a fundamentally friendly person. No matter how much he wanted to complain, he never showed it outwardly except in very unusual circumstances. He had never purposely tried to develop this tendency in his time as a student: it was something he'd learned since entering the working world. He liked it best when he could interact with others on a completely superficial level. Then he could get along without hurting anyone.

But that could have a bad effect on the women he dealt with. If they became friends, everything was fine, but if they misunderstood his intentions, things got ugly.

He didn't hate women—not at all. If he could just get over his past, he might not even mind dating.

But when he thought about what might come after, he hit a dead end.

He had left his heart behind one summer eight years ago. So Sawa was now incapable of loving anyone.

He couldn't quite forget that old flame no matter how he tried, but it wasn't a woman. It was someone of the same sex, from the same grade. But he didn't inhabit the same world as Sawa.

For four months, they had loved each other. But that very brevity made the time seem all the more like

a precious dream, and he still cherished its beauty even now.

Of course he didn't believe that he was still bound by that old love. Once it had ended, he'd had several opportunities to date women, though he had not pursued them. In the process, he had come to recognize the fact that he couldn't love anyone. Before, he had been much closer with people than he was now. Not just lovers, but everybody.

But things were different now.

"Do you mind just calling it quits here for today? The truth is, there's a decent little bar near here. My treat. You want to come?"

Any other day, he would have rejected the offer without a second thought. But it was so hot today. And on top of that, he was worn out from walking around and exhausted from Kashima's company. But if that same Kashima was offering to buy him a drink, there couldn't be any harm in accepting for a change.

"Well, just for a little while," Sawa answered with a pleasant smile. Kashima reacted with exaggerated delight. Sawa should have given a little more thought to the reason for Kashima's broad grin, but at that moment Sawa's mind was full of the anticipation of drinking a cold beer.

But standing in front of the bar Kashima brought him to, he fully regretted it.

It was Kashima. If he had given even a moment's thought to the kind of place Kashima would like, he

would have easily pictured this bar. But his passing desire had misled all of his judgment.

They were in a narrow alley that swerved off from the main street of Kabuki-cho, standing before an ostentatious bar with dozens of photos of girls looking enticing pasted to the window. If he had to give it a name, Sawa would have to call it a cabaret; not a very classy place.

The arrogant attitude of the staff, who wore fancy pants and vests, got on his nerves and he was aghast at how weak the springs of the sofa they led him to were.

Then came the crowning moment.

"Good evening! It's been so long since we saw you, Mister Kashima!"

Two women in outrageous makeup and teddies that barely covered their underwear came up to their table. One of them was carrying a brandy bottle and a bucket of ice on a tray.

"I know, Mami baby. I've been so busy lately I haven't been able to take any time off for myself."

"But I've been so lonely."

The girl named Mami, her brown hair pulled up, sat down comfortably next to Kashima. She picked up one of the warm hand towels set on the table and handed it to Kashima attentively.

"Here you go."

"Thanks."

The other girl sat down next to Sawa. She looked twenty-one, or twenty-two at the most. The heavy lipstick she had slathered on her lips wasn't flattering.

"And who's this?"

"My boy Sawa, who transferred in in April. He's young, but he's a real go-getter. He's really popular at our branch office. Don't you go for those types, Mami?"

"Yeah, he's super cute. How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-six," he answered with his business smile, though all he could think about was his disgust at what kind of a description "super cute" was supposed to be.

"Wow, he's older than I thought," the woman next to Sawa said in surprise as she put ice in their glasses.

"You're having a double whiskey and water, right, Mister Kashima? And Mister...Sawa, was it? How do you want yours?"

"I'll take water, too. And only a single of whiskey."

That did a lot to soothe Sawa. He had imagined that they would be going to a nice bar or a yakitori take-out stand to grab a cold beer.

Some simple snacks were brought to the table, but he couldn't find anything to pad his stomach. Sawa was so thirsty he might knock back his whiskey in one shot, and he was pretty sure that would get him drunk.

"Well, cheers, I suppose. Drink up, Sawa."

"Thank you, sir."

"Bottoms up!" the two girls screeched, raising their own glasses.

The lighting in the bar was very dim, so he couldn't make out the customers at the other tables. Of course Sawa had come to bars like this many times before with associates from work. He was naturally friendly, so he

could more or less get by, but the truth was, he just wasn't very comfortable in these sorts of places.

He greatly preferred going out for some cold drinks with laid-back guys at a cheap but good restaurant, then going home. He'd really screwed up today. It would be best to just find an opportunity to leave as quickly as possible.

Completely oblivious to Sawa's mood, Kashima was happily gulping down his drink. He was drinking on an empty stomach, so his face was bright red and he was already slurring his words. He was taking advantage of his drunkenness to put his hand on Mami's thigh again and again, which annoyed Sawa.

He had intended to cut out early, but it looked like it would be better if he stayed with Kashima for the night. He glanced down at his watch. They'd been in the bar a little more than an hour, so if they left now it probably wouldn't offend anyone.

"I'm going to go the bathroom."

Sawa stood up, knowing he would have to prepare himself before coming back.

"Hey, I'm still drinking here," Kashima shouted in an unpleasantly loud voice. He must have thought Sawa was trying to go home. Sawa gave him a sidelong glance before escaping from their booth and heading toward the bathroom.

There was a very drunk group of four at the table next to theirs. They were all in fair range of Kashima in terms of age, but there was a rougher atmosphere surrounding their table. The girls with them had strained smiles and looked anxious.

The only other customers were two men in suits sitting at the bar talking with the staff behind it. It wasn't a big place, so this was probably a good number.

Sawa got an ominous feeling he couldn't identify, so he hurried to do his business and get back to the bar. When he reemerged, he heard the unmistakeable sound of glass shattering.

"Leave me the hell alone, buddy!"

After this sharp order, a very badly dressed man stood up. He was brazenly threatening Kashima, grabbing him by the collar.

"...Too late."

Sawa's premonition had been right on target. Sawa hurried back to their table, but the man was already terrorizing Kashima relentlessly.

"How many times are you gonna punch me in the head?"

"I—I didn't! I was just...stretching and my hand went over to your side."

"That's what I said. You punched me. You stupid or something?"

It was probably because he was so drunk, but the man's aggressive language was working perfectly to frighten Kashima. He was absolutely terrified, both his hands raised in defense or pleading.

"Calm down, please. What happened?"

"Who the hell are you?" The man turned to glare at Sawa. He was making a show of it all, but Sawa didn't get the impression that he was that dangerous. Sawa tried to find out what was going on without upsetting the man more than necessary.

"This guy is my boss. If there's been some kind of trouble—"

"He's your boss? You must be a real winner. He doesn't even apologize for punching people in the head."

"I didn't do it, Sawa! I—I didn't mean to hit him! I was just stretching and accidentally hit his head."

Sawa could imagine exactly what had happened, but right now, he had to keep things from getting out of control. If he just ran off to call the police, things could get bad.

"I apologize. As you can see, my boss is more than a little drunk tonight. He didn't do it deliberately, so might you be willing to overlook this incident?"

"Huh? He punched me. If I don't hit him back, it'll start to bug me."

Sawa was a little impressed with himself for not being at all intimidated by the abusive voice yelling at him.

He wasn't exactly used to being in situations like this. He had only had one experience more tense than this, eight years ago. Some men affiliated with a gang had accosted him. And even though he knew they wouldn't hurt him, the threat posed by those men, whose only approach to life was risking their lives, wasn't even in the same ballpark as the man in front of him now.

His arm had been twisted behind him and he had been punched. The merciless blow had swollen his cheek and cut the inside of his mouth. It had been so bad that he'd been unable to eat for a few days.

A bitter smile came over Sawa's lips at the memory

of the pain in his cheek and the pain in his heart. He felt pity and contempt for himself, since even eight years later the memory was still as fresh as if it had happened yesterday.

"What the hell are you smiling about?"

"I'm sorry, I was thinking about something else."

"Excuse me? What the hell are you thinking about at a time like this?"

It looked like his smile had rubbed the man the wrong way.

"You said that you would be upset about my boss hitting you unless you could hit someone else. In that case, I'll offer to let you hit me."

"What the—? Do you get off on pain or something?"

"No, I don't. But my boss is drunk. He wouldn't feel a thing even if you did hit him and then you would both be worse off. So that's why I'm suggesting that you hit me, as his subordinate." Sawa surprised himself with his defiance and the strength of his nerves.

His speech succeeded in intimidating the other men.

"The hell? You've—you've got balls."

But the man in front of him wasn't noble enough to back down, apparently.

"I'll give you what you want then, and no holding back," the man shouted as he pulled his arm back to strike.

"You would be far better off restraining yourself at this point."

A polite but sharp voice iced over everything in its

path, resounding frigidly in the bar.

"Who the hell are you?"

"I saw what happened, and I know that that man did not hit you. His hand simply grazed your head because you were leaning so far back. A baby could have caused you more serious injury flailing its arms."

They heard the sound of shoes scraping over the floor. It was one of the customers sitting at the bar coming to their rescue. His height and solid build were obscured by a gray suit. Sawa couldn't see his face clearly due to the low light, but his hair was perfectly gelled. His silver-rimmed glasses reflected the scant light, giving the man an inhuman veneer.

"Who the hell do you think you are? This doesn't involve you."

"Unfortunately, it does. This bar is part of a franchise that we manage, and we would prefer that the police not get involved."

He was speaking calmly, but his voice overwhelmed its listeners, never allowing them a chance to respond. Memories that Sawa thought were sealed away tightly were set to buzzing life at the sound of it.

It can't be him. It's not possible. He refused the idea, but memories flooded his mind and his entire body went rigid.

The man didn't seem to notice Sawa's distress.

"That's not a very nice thing to say to a paying customer."

He swung his arm, but the man in the glasses easily dodged it. He caught his customer's wrist and jerked it up toward the ceiling.

"Augh!"

"I'm sorry if I did not make myself clear, sir. This is intended to be a place where people can come and have a pleasant chat and a drink with our girls. We do not wish to have customers get drunk and harass the other customers."

"Ow, ow! That hurts!"

"And everyone here is our guest. We would prefer that those who disturb the enjoyment of our guests not come. Have I made myself clear?"

The man turned abruptly, and his profile came into Sawa's field of vision.

Thin eyes glimmered behind his silver-rimmed glasses, and a cold smile rested on his lips. When he was silent, his intellectual demeanor might have let him pass for the director of a multibillion dollar company. But he betrayed that appearance by casually tossing off such stern words. There was something haunting about the man's sophisticated looks.

"You're in trouble, man. Let it go."

The other men in his group were pale.

"He's got a badge from the Koryu Alliance."

"Uh-oh. Hurry up and apologize!"

At the furtive whisper of the words "Koryu Alliance," Sawa's skin prickled.

"What will it be, sir?"

"I'll apologize—I—I apologize. I'm sorry. I started the fight. Please let me go now."

He was half in tears now, his macho act nowhere to be found. The man in the glasses sighed and released the man's arm with an exasperated shake of his head.

"Does that sound like an apology to you?"

"Then what do you want from me?"

"Let's have you grovel."

The man cowered under the cold words and contemptuous gaze.

A baritone voice from the bar cut short any further demands. "Lay off him, Iwatsuki. What's the point intimidating a nobody like him?"

Sawa froze. A chill ran down his spine at the sound of that voice. There was a trace of sharpness in it, but the voice was firm.

"He apologized, so let's just drop it. We're even. The door's right over there. You can see yourselves out."

He interposed himself gracefully and indicated the door with an elegant hand. The men gathered their belongings in relief and hurriedly left the bar, practically running.

"Man, what's with all these amateurs lately? They're getting on my nerves." The man sitting at the bar swirled the ice in his glass and turned to look at them. "And you, Sir Lancelot. A sense of justice is okay and all, but if you don't know when to back off, you're going to get in trouble."

The man was wearing a black suit that melted into the shadows except for a gold necklace hanging on his bare chest, which reflected the faint light. The women were gathering around him at a slight distance, making flirtatious noises. Even in silhouette, it was easy to see the poise and charm in his body language. He seemed somehow uncomfortable. It made Sawa's heart race.

"Thank you for your help." Sawa bowed his head quickly and picked Kashima up from the sofa where he had buried himself, supporting his weight. Kashima was dead drunk, so naturally he hadn't been paying any attention to this exchange. Why did he have to be such a pain about everything?

"I didn't hit him, y'know."

"I know, I know. It's all right now. Let's get you home," Sawa anxiously calmed Kashima and, laying a hand on his shoulder, tried to hurry him out of the bar. He might still make it. He might still be able to get out of here looking like just another customer...

"Where do we pay?"

"Please don't concern yourselves with that. You didn't have a good time, so we can't charge. We can offer you a bottle of something on the house. Why not stay to drink it?" the man in glasses offered.

"No, I appreciate the offer, but my boss getting drunk is what started all this, after all," Sawa answered, trying to move his lips as little as possible.

He tried to hoist Kashima up, but he was amazingly heavy considering how short he was. And supporting someone who doesn't want to walk is never easy. Sawa staggered, and they almost fell over.

"You won't make it home like that. We can call you a cab. In the meantime, we can help you outside."

When the man came up to tear Kashima from Sawa's arms, he suddenly froze.

"Oh—"

He knows.

"No, we'll be fine. Sorry for all the trouble we've

caused." Sawa tried to make a hasty retreat, dragging Kashima with him. It was all he could do to escape the gaze of the man in glasses who had frozen in front of them.

"Sir, there's no need to go to take such unnecessary risks."

But because Sawa was only worried about what was behind him, he wasn't paying any attention to what was in front of him. The other man stood before a closed door, his arms crossed.

Sawa's heart pounded. Sweat trailed down his back and his arms, his knees trembling. He tried to keep his gaze down to keep the man from seeing his face.

Eight years lay behind them. His hairstyle and clothes were different now. Just because Sawa had recognized the man didn't mean the man would recognize him. He hoped he wouldn't.

His head bowed, filled with these thoughts, it was as if he was truly praying.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble."

He turned toward the open door and pulled himself forward one step at a time. Trying not to be noticed. Trying not to be recognized.

Sawa stifled his breathing and twisted his body away from the man. He thought he had made it past when Kashima said, "It's the next door over, Sawa. Not that one."

His drunk, idiot boss had called Sawa by name, and in an obnoxiously loud voice.

"Mister Kashima!"

By the time he'd gotten the idea to try and cover



Kashima's voice with his own, the man in front of the door, Uzuki Kobayakawa, had already noticed him.

"Junya?"

He raised his eyebrows, and his well-shaped lips pronounced this name, heavy with memories. The instant Sawa heard it, a shock like an electric current ran through his body.

"Is that you?"

It wasn't a question. Sawa bit down on his lips at the certainty in Kobayakawa's voice. He noticed that the man in glasses, Soichiro Iwatsuki, was standing beside the door now, too.

Trying to escape their eyes, Sawa didn't respond and simply bowed his head deeply, stopped a taxi that was passing outside, and hurriedly climbed inside with his boss.

"Junya!"

Sawa gave the taxi the directions before Kobayakawa could run out of the bar after shaking off his shock.

Kobayakawa watched the taxi pull away, his image reflected in the taxi's rearview mirror for a long moment.

"Sorry about what happened yesterday."

Kashima had come up to Sawa cautiously as he was preparing to go home after work. He was persistently wiping the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and his eyes roamed everywhere, as if he felt awkward.

"I heard you got me into a taxi and took me all the

way home. The wife reamed me out once I woke up, and that helped me figure it out."

Sawa pulled out a smile and answered, "It was nothing."

He'd felt eyes on him all day, but he'd been busy and hadn't had the time to wonder about it. This was the first time Sawa had been at his desk all day.

"I only remember the first thirty minutes in the bar. The rest is a blur. Did I do anything bad?"

Sawa had suspected this would happen. It was too much trouble to rehash everything that had happened yesterday.

"Nothing that can't be written off to having too much to drink. Don't let it bother you." Kashima would probably talk to his favorite girl the next time he went to the bar, but it would be better for him to hear about it from her.

Fleeing from Kashima, who was apologizing profusely, Sawa started walking for home. He had begun to feel as if what had happened yesterday had all been a dream. But Kashima's apology had forced him to realize that it wasn't.

Uzuki Kobayakawa. In the eight years since they'd last seen each other, he'd become much more mature and looked much better. Even back in the old days when Kobayakawa had worn the school's severe uniform, Sawa had felt some kind of manly charm exuding from him. But last night it had been much more intense.

Part of it might have been because his chest had been showing beneath his jacket, but Sawa understood why the girls in the bar thronged around him—he

could practically smell the masculine pheromones that Kobayakawa exuded.

They were in his languorous manner and speaking style. Kobayakawa's voice had gotten deeper since the last time he'd heard it, but the touch of naïveté still remained.

Junya.

The memory of his voice sent a shudder down Sawa's spine.

He could never forget him, the transfer student who'd come in May of their senior year at high school—an odd time. He'd been obscured by a quality that Sawa didn't understand.

Sawa had known nothing but the most ordinary of lives, and Kobayakawa had shown him something different. Sawa had loved him, and he had loved Sawa. But in the end, the world Kobayakawa inhabited as the heir to a yakuza family was too different.

Sawa had betrayed him and disappeared from his life. They had never spoken since then, until running into each other yesterday.

When Sawa went on to college, he could have been accepted at plenty of good schools, but he'd gone to a second tier school in his hometown. He didn't want to go to Tokyo, where Kobayakawa was.

He'd chosen to work for the regional bank for the same reason. There were no words to describe his feelings at the outrageous fact that he was in Tokyo now.

Tokyo was huge, and so was its population. He'd brushed aside his concern with the idea that after eight

years, even if they ran into each other on the street by some odd chance, they would never recognize each other. But it looked like that had just been wishful thinking. Sawa knew that he, at least, would recognize Kobayakawa wherever he saw him.

And now Kobayakawa had done it, too.

The only reason Sawa had run was that he couldn't face the reality of it, nothing more. But his desire to see Kobayakawa again coexisted with his desire not to. He didn't know how the emotions he'd been suppressing all this time would manifest if he did see him. Sawa had lived his life these last eight years by forgetting about Kobayakawa and sealing away the memories.

But now Sawa had seen him. What would he do if they saw each other again? He'd been thinking about it non-stop, but he still didn't have an answer.

“Sawa.”

Sawa looked up at the oddly familiar voice. It belonged to a man wearing sunglasses, his bangs gelled up away from his face, and a white double-breasted two piece suit with a dark red open-necked shirt beneath it. It was Kobayakawa. Something in him had almost been expecting this, so his emotions were in check.

Casually pulling off his glasses, Kobayakawa revealed his face, smiling almost cruelly. He walked calmly up to Sawa, whose surprise showed. Kobayakawa's get-up contrasted starkly with the office district they were in and attracted a lot of stares.

“You surprised me yesterday, man. I never thought

I'd run into you in a place like that."

He was speaking pleasantly, as if he'd forgotten that Sawa had run away from him yesterday.

"I was surprised, too. But what are you doing here?"

Sawa was trying hard to sound calm, but the voice that came out of his mouth sounded like it belonged to someone else.

"I really wanted to talk to you, so I asked the girls at your table about you guys. They said that Kashima guy works here. And you said he was your boss, right? So I figured if I waited here, I'd run into you."

But what did Kobayakawa want to talk about so badly? Sawa's curiosity got the better of him.

"I see. So why did you want to talk to me?"

"Unfortunately, some stupid job thing's come up, so I can't stay and chat. Too bad. But do you want to get together some time and celebrate running into each other?"

"Yeah, sure. It'll be like a reunion."

Sawa hadn't had the slightest intention of agreeing, and he hated himself for getting caught up in the string of social niceties.

"Are you free on weekends?"

"I am this weekend. I always have to stay late to finish up on Fridays, so any time after nine is fine."

"That's perfect. My brain won't start if I go out too early. Know what I mean? Anyway, here's my card." Kobayakawa took a card out of the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Uh, thanks. Let me find mine." Sawa's fingers

trembled pitifully as they closed on the card case in his inside pocket.

"Hey, your address isn't on here," Kobayakawa protested as he examined the card.

"Well, it's got my company's address on it."

"Then tell me your cell phone number. You've got one, right?"

"Yeah. It's 090—" He started giving his phone number, feeling pressured by Kobayakawa's pushy voice.

"Hold on. I'm going to write it down," Kobayakawa said with surly eyes. He wrote the number Sawa gave him on the back of his card with a pen. "There we go. You remember where the bar is?"

"Yeah."

"In the building next to it there's a bar called Number Five. It's one of the places I run. It'll be quiet there, and no one'll bother us. I'll see you there around nine."

Pinching the card between his fingers, Kobayakawa clapped his hand against Sawa's chest. In the same moment, Kobayakawa's nostalgic scent assaulted Sawa's nose. His body trembled at its familiarity, almost exactly the same as before.

As he watched Kobayakawa disappear into the throng of people, he felt time, which had ground to a halt around him, flip back into motion.

He let out a deep sigh. He hadn't reacted excessively, had he? Had he managed to act as if nothing was wrong?

As long as Kobayakawa didn't talk about the past,

he couldn't do it either. Sawa had to fix a smile on his face and pretend to be nothing more than a classmate from high school.

He probably should have declined the invitation. Considering his life up till now, he knew he should have. But seeing this long-lost face, there was no way he could have turned it down.

Chapter Two

Pleasant jazz music floated out on the air as he pushed open the heavy chocolate brown doors.

"Come on in." A white-haired bartender at the very beginning of old age came to greet him, standing in front of the stylish, simply designed wood bar. There were seven tall stools set at the bar. There were no tables, and no customers besides Sawa.

"I'm supposed to be meeting someone here."

"I'll be taking your order. Kobayakawa is running a little behind schedule, so he told me to invite you to have something to eat while you wait."

"I see."

This information produced a sigh of relief from Sawa. He chose a seat on the left half of the bar.

He felt more nervous than he thought he would, even though this meeting was under the hollow pretext of a class reunion. He was worried about what Kobayakawa wanted to tell him. He didn't know how he should act towards him. He told himself that he just had to keep smiling till the end. But in truth, he felt very little confidence.

"What'll you have to drink?"

Sawa considered the question as he wiped his hands with the warm towel the bartender handed him. "If you've got some beer on tap, I'll have that." He knew

it lacked flair, but he wanted to wet his parched throat.

"Certainly, sir. Anything to eat?"

Sawa looked at the menu and chose soy beans with Chinese style cold tofu and fried chicken. Once he'd ordered, the beer, served in a tall, crooked glass, and the soy beans were ready at once.

"Are you a friend of Kobayakawa's?"

The bartender was wiping a glass with a cloth in silence. "Kobayakawa owns this bar."

"Is that a fact?"

He remembered seeing the title of director on the card Kobayakawa had given him. The name of his company had been Koryu Cooperative Industries.

"There's not a person running a bar anywhere in Kabuki-cho who doesn't know the name Kobayakawa. The Kobayakawas have been in charge of more than half the places here for more than a generation."

A dubious glance turned on Sawa.

"I haven't seen him since we were in high school together, so I don't know what he's been up to lately."

"I see." The bartender's demeanor relaxed at Sawa's answer. "The director is still young, but his father's aide Mister Iwatsuki has done a lot to help, so he's finally earning the respect of the community now."

Iwatsuki—he had met the man eight years ago, and at the time Sawa would have said he was in his late thirties. He had seemed like such an adult then. But maybe he had only been in his twenties after all.

If that was true, he had considerable initiative.

Iwatsuki was synonymous with the words *yakuza* or *gangster* in Sawa's mind.

There was a long silence then. Just as Sawa was wondering if he should order another beer, the door opened.

"Hello, sir."

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

As soon as he heard the voice, tension gripped Sawa's entire body.

After returning the bartender's greeting, Kobayakawa made his appearance. He was such a flamboyant man. The moment he entered, the shadows of the bar evaporated. Sawa's entire body was flooded with anxiety at the mere sight of this radiant man. Today he was wearing a navy blue two piece suit. The jacket was open, revealing his chest and the same flashy gold necklace.

"I was on my way here when some guys started having problems, and I wound up having to go deal with it. It was a real pain."

His bangs were set with gel, but one strand fell across his forehead. Sawa watched him, fascinated, as he brushed it back into place with annoyance.

"Is everything taken care of now?"

"Yeah, I took care of it," Kobayakawa answered the bartender's question testily and sat down next to Sawa. A glass of brandy was soon set before him. Some ice floated inside, in the shape of balls.

"Your glass is empty, Sawa. Are you done drinking already?"

The sudden change in conversation sent Sawa's heart racing. "No, it's just—I was wondering what to get next when you came in."

"Then hurry up and pick something. Otherwise we can't toast."

"I'll take a gin and tonic, then." Drawn in by Kobayakawa's upbeat tone, Sawa answered in the same spirit.

"Right away, sir."

While they waited, Kobayakawa lit a cigarette. "Do you smoke?"

Sawa refused the pack Kobayakawa offered him with a smile. "Cigarettes make me sick."

"Yeah, they cut your life in half." Kobayakawa turned a guileless smile on him.

"I wish someone would say there were benefits, but cigarettes never did anybody any good."

"My only wish is to die from smoking. I'd also be okay with drinking myself to death."

"It doesn't sound like you're joking, sir. I'm going to have to ask you to stop talking like that." The bartender smiled, skillfully steering the conversation. "You've been hospitalized for that already, haven't you? Your throat was a mess." He placed the finished gin and tonic before Sawa.

"That had nothing to do with cigarettes, though," Kobayakawa answered, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

"You were hospitalized?"

"Don't blow it out of proportion. I caught a little cold at a bad time is all. It wasn't cigarettes. Anyway, to us! Cheers! C'mon, pick up your glass."

Sawa reluctantly picked his glass up, leaving the story unexplained.

"How long has it been? Seven, eight years?"

"Eight, I think." The past stole back into Sawa's mind at Kobayakawa's question.

"That long? It's gone by so fast. What have you been doing with yourself? I bet you went straight to college and got an office job like everyone else. I can't believe you're working at a damn bank." Kobayakawa grinned, his eyes fixed on a point directly in front of him.

"And I can't believe you're the director of a company. That's incredible."

"It's not really a company. We just call it that."

"That's not fair. You still perform all the duties of a director, just like any other." The bartender refuted Kobayakawa's self-pitying words with a sincere look.

"You never shut up, do you old man? Try keeping it to yourself for a change." Apparently Kobayakawa had deep respect for this bartender, because although the words were harsh, his eyes were laughing.

They chatted in spurts as they drank. The majority of their conversation was about where friends from high school had ended up, and neither of them touched on the central issue.

"I better get going. The last train's about to leave."

The clock was approaching midnight.

"Is it that late already? Take care on your way home. I'm going to keep drinking."

Sawa hadn't expected to get away so easily. And despite how much alcohol he'd had, Kobayakawa didn't look very drunk. Apparently he could handle more than

his share of alcohol and tobacco.

Sawa hesitated before saying, "It was good to see you again."

"You too. We should go drinking again soon."

"Yeah," Sawa answered ambiguously and left the bar. He walked for a few seconds, then turned back to look at the bar. But he lacked the courage to open the door again.

Talking about the past with Kobayakawa had been completely shallow, both of them trying not to hurt the other and keep up appearances. He hadn't had a bad time, but it felt somehow unstable.

But the fact that he had been able to talk to Kobayakawa made him a little happier.

"Why don't I take you out to eat to thank you for what you did?" Kashima asked Sawa the following Friday. He hadn't been able to refuse, and they wound up going to a hotel in Shinjuku after their work around town.

Sawa thought that he would die in the glaring midday sunlight, but as it was close to seven in the evening, thick clouds began to cover the sky. *Rain's coming*, he thought, and headed towards the elevator that would take him to the lobby on the thirty-ninth floor, where Kashima had told him to meet him.

If he had just invited him out for drinks, he could have refused. In fact, at first he had refused. Kashima had looked crushed. He wanted Sawa to give him a chance to make up for the trouble he'd caused the last time.

Even if Kashima was his superior in name only, his boss was still his boss. He'd told Sawa that other people would be coming along, so Sawa reluctantly agreed, convinced that there would be no repeat performance of their last trip. But when he got off at the thirty-ninth floor, he spotted Kashima in the spacious lobby, and he fiercely regretted accepting the invitation.

There was a woman sitting with Kashima at a table. Sawa didn't recognize her. But somehow he could imagine what sort of work she did.

"We're over here, Sawa!"

Before it even occurred to him to just turn around and leave again, Kashima caught sight of him. This was going to suck.

"This is Takako Fukaya, from the Hiroo branch office. She did a lot of good work under me while I was there."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." A classic Japanese beauty with a composed demeanor, she bowed deeply.

Only a few seconds after Sawa sat down, Kashima stood up. "I made reservations for you two at the Japanese restaurant on the first floor. So why don't I let you two get on with it?"

"What?"

"Sorry, I've got to take care of some urgent business. But I really wanted to do something to make up for last time. I hope you two have fun."

"I see. That's too bad." His excuse was plausible, but Sawa knew that it was all a set up. He was

disappointed in himself for falling for it. But it wasn't Fukaya's fault, so he saw Kashima off and then turned back to her with a smile. "Well, it won't be the same with just the two of us, but shall we go eat?"

"Okay," Fukaya replied with a bright smile.

Even after they'd been seated, Fukaya continued to show no reluctance. He began to suspect that she had been in on it from the start.

"Mister Kashima has always gone out of his way to help me. I feel very lucky that he's made it possible to be with you like this today, Mister Sawa."

Once the meal had finished and they had begun their drinks, Fukaya revealed the truth.

"Have we met?"

"There isn't a girl in any bank in the entire city who doesn't know who you are, Mister Sawa." He was shocked at her intensity when she said this. Maybe Kashima was the one who had been used.

Despite his annoyance, Sawa saw the meal through to its end and took the bill. While he paid, Fukaya left for the bathroom.

Sawa gave the bill to the cashier, but Kashima had already taken care of everything. With nothing else to do, he waited in front of the restaurant. Suddenly, he caught sight of a flamboyant man walking by.

He was carrying an overnight bag, wearing a suit somewhere between navy blue and purple with a garish red shirt. The clothes themselves were exquisite, but the combination he'd chosen made him look exactly like a gangster. He could have been an actor or a model. Sawa was still staring at him when the man seemed to notice

him. His gaze, which had been lazily scanning the room, suddenly focused.

That was what made him recognize the person approaching him. It was Kobayakawa, walking toward him without any companions.

"Hey. What're you doing here all by yourself?"

"I'm waiting for my friend."

Sawa forced a smile. Just then, a high-pitched voice said, "Sorry to keep you waiting." Fukaya was back.

"Oh, it's like that." Kobayakawa smirked as he looked from Sawa to Fukaya and back again.

"Who is this, Mister Sawa?" She must have been drunk, because as she flirtatiously spoke his name, she twined her slender arm around Sawa's.

"Kobayakawa, this is—"

"Sorry to bother you guys," Kobayakawa said quickly, then turned his back on Sawa. Sawa was struck by the urge to run after him. But what would he say to him if he did?

Did he want to tell Kobayakawa that he'd gotten the wrong idea? But what was it that Kobayakawa had misunderstood?

Even assuming it was a misunderstanding, he didn't owe Kobayakawa an explanation. They had no connection that would require it. He remembered that fact and wanted to laugh.

"I still have some time before I need to go home, Mister Sawa...."

"I'm sorry, but I just remembered something I need to do. Shall we call it a night?"

They rode the elevator together to the entrance on

the second floor and he forced Fukaya into a taxi that was there. He pressed far too much money into her hand to use for the fare. "We should get together again with Mister Kashima. I had fun tonight."

His smile never faltered, and he watched her taxi drive off until it was out of sight. Then he ran back into the elevator.

Kobayakawa had been carrying an overnight bag and heading for the front desk. If he checked in after they'd run into each other, he might not be in his room yet. Sawa didn't know if he would be in time, but he ran down the corridor of the thirty-ninth floor clinging to this hope.

"Are you looking for me?"

Closer to the front desk, he saw Kobayakawa had sunk into a sofa. His long legs were thrown out in front of him, crossed at the ankles, his back against the sofa.

"If so, you're in luck."

"How did you—?"

Kobayakawa grinned at Sawa's expression. "If you're wondering what I'm doing here, they said my room wasn't ready yet, so I was just killing time. I wasn't exactly waiting for you to come find me."

Sawa's face flushed at this response. He seemed to see right through him.

"What happened to your girlfriend? Wasn't tonight going to be special?"

"She's not my girlfriend. My boss set us up," Sawa explained, his breathing still ragged.

"So if you're not staying at the hotel, what're you doing here? You mean you actually came looking for me?"

A chill ran down Sawa's back under Kobayakawa's probing gaze. The frigid sensation prickled the skin of his entire body. He thought frantically about what he should do, but he didn't reach any conclusions. Simple instinct spoke to him, telling him, *go along with it*.

"You're right." Sawa balled his hands into fists. "I was looking for you."

Small wrinkles formed between Kobayakawa's eyebrows at Sawa's declaration. "I took a room upstairs. Do you want to come up and talk?" Kobayakawa had a room key in his hand. The clinking noise they made became an alarm bell inside Sawa. Kobayakawa's eyes pierced his heart.

If he accepted Kobayakawa's invitation now, there would be no going back. It would undermine everything he had accomplished in distancing himself eight years ago. Sawa knew that, but he couldn't get away. He knew it so well that he didn't want to get away.

Because he had always regretted his decision; regretted listening to Iwatsuki's advice; regretted betraying Kobayakawa's feelings.

He had been unable to forget the lover he'd left behind eight years ago. He'd been unable to fill the gaping hole in his heart by himself.

Even if it was wrong to accept Kobayakawa's invitation, it was nothing compared to Sawa's crime eight years before.

Even if he was going to get hurt again, he could never suffer more than he had then.

They rode the elevator to the forty-fifth floor and followed the corridor all the way to the end. Kobayakawa opened the door there with his key and motioned for Sawa to go in first.

"It's amazing."

The suite room was situated on the corner of the building, a hundred square meters in size. Just next to the entrance there was a giant walk-in closet and doors leading to the bathroom and bedroom. In the living area, there was a luxurious living room set and a dinner table. The floor-to-ceiling windows gave a view of the night lights of Tokyo's heart.

"This room is huge. Do you live here?"

As Sawa started to turn around, the lights of the room dimmed, and arms closed around him from behind.

"Kobayakawa—"

"You're not going to turn me down after you were such a slut to come all the way here, are you?"

Sawa felt Kobayakawa's hot breath on his neck. Things were happening exactly as he'd expected they would, but still Sawa's body shuddered.

"Are you nervous? You were always ready for it before."

Kobayakawa's hands wound to the front of Sawa's body and deftly loosened the knot in his tie. But he didn't take it all the way off, instead leaving it half-untied, hanging over Sawa's belly. His hands moved on to unbuckling his belt.

"Kobayakawa—"

"It doesn't matter even if you do resist. I'm way

bigger than you. Just look at our reflections in the windows. It's useless, isn't it?"

Sawa raised his eyes obediently. The glass of the windows that had, just a moment before, revealed the skyscrapers of Tokyo were now a mirror.

Sawa stood in the middle of the room's hazy reflection. A man's arms were wrapped around his suited body, rubbing against his chest and crotch.

"Ah—"

Kobayakawa pulled the belt free of Sawa's pants and moved next to his zipper. Sawa had no skills of his own to stop Kobayakawa's practiced movements.

"Did you do it with any guys after me?" Kobayakawa whispered in his ear, gently nibbling on his earlobe. The voice vibrated down Sawa's spine.

Sawa shook his head.

"Really? I have. If you go on the back streets, there's tons of guys there, and they don't care if you're a man or a woman. When I went, they were so excited they were lining up to get to me."

Kobayakawa was only being this vulgar because he knew how Sawa would react.

Kobayakawa's fingers slipped unceremoniously into Sawa's pants and into his underwear to touch a part of Sawa that he was still trying to keep under control. The light pressure brought the desire slumbering within him swelling into life.

"And there've been too many women to count. I tried it that way, too."

Sawa's breathing came faster. Kobayakawa's fingers traced Sawa's shape through the cloth of his

underwear, searching out the opening in the cloth to touch his skin.

"Nngh."

"I guess you weren't doing much if you're getting hard just from this. Are you sure you don't want to spend the rest of the night with that girl?"

Kobayakawa's abuse pricked Sawa's nerves. Nails dragged the skin over the narrowest part of him and Sawa shuddered. He was surprised at that sleazy part of himself that kept getting harder at the touch of the man's hand.

Unlike Kobayakawa, Sawa had never once been with a man in the eight years they'd been apart. He had barely even had sex with women; he could distinctly remember every single time. This part of him had never been caressed so directly.

Maybe that was why Sawa's body felt every movement of Kobayakawa's fingers so keenly. All of his movements were drawn out in Sawa's mind before he made them a reality—how Kobayakawa would touch him, where he would move, and how he would caress that new place.

"Sawa—" Kobayakawa pressed against Sawa's hips, hard now, too, and warm.

The kisses against the skin of his neck grew longer and the sucking came harder. Kobayakawa's right hand moved to Sawa's chest. He slipped inside the collar of his shirt to touch the skin, groping around beneath the cloth to find Sawa's nipples. He pinched them hard.

"Mm."

"Do you like that? When I touch you?"

Sawa's crotch was warming just from the hand playing over his chest. He grew harder and harder with Kobayakawa's hand around him, and liquid began to pool at the tip.

"Hey, you're getting a little ahead of yourself, don't you think?" Kobayakawa scolded and dug at the tip of Sawa's organ with his nails.

He slathered the rising liquid over Sawa's shaft. The sticky sensation fed Sawa's desire with a shuddering delight. Kobayakawa crushed the pads of his fingers against it, and Sawa could only feel the sensation in his shaft. That part of Sawa swelled with blood, all his nerves focusing on that spot.

Sawa's nerves had become so sensitive that the sensation of his shirt rubbing over his chest made his skin feel ticklish even when Kobayakawa wasn't touching him.

"Mm—nngh."

"You're not going to fight it?"

Kobayakawa's fingers suddenly stopped moving. Sawa realized that Kobayakawa was examining his face in the mirror. Sawa was hypnotized by his eyes.

He shook his head.

When he'd run into Kobayakawa here at the hotel and then come after him, his mind was already made up. He hadn't gone into this expecting to be seduced, but when Sawa found Kobayakawa at the front desk, when Kobayakawa looked at him, Sawa had been forced to recognize the fact that he had been searching for this man for a long time.

Even though he'd known that being invited up to

Kobayakawa's room meant that they would have sex, Sawa couldn't refuse. When he accepted, he had known that he would be seduced.

Sawa believed that accepting responsibility required his submission. He thought it was the only way to make up for his crimes.

"Oh really? In that case, I'd better try something different." Kobayakawa let go of Sawa's body and turned him around to face him. "Get me ready."

Kobayakawa pulled down his zipper. His fingers, wet from tormenting Sawa, guided him towards his object. It was already twitching, full of energy. Sawa gulped, facing once more the thing that had taught his body to feel its first sweet intoxications.

"You're disgusting. You want it that badly?"

Kobayakawa taunted him. He'd probably seen Sawa's Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. He put a hand on Sawa's head and pushed him down to it. Sawa submitted to it and, with only a brief hesitation, he knelt on the carpet and gingerly reached out to embrace Kobayakawa's member.

It was nothing like Sawa's. Its hardness, its shape; everything was different.

Sawa stretched his tongue out to the root, where it extended from Kobayakawa's body. He cradled the pouch of skin behind it in his hands and slid his tongue over the entire length of it, as if he were licking an ice cream cone.

He knew that Kobayakawa's breath had caught. Feeling him on his lips, Sawa grew excited, too.

Kobayakawa's underwear was in his way, and was



quickly becoming drenched as Sawa enthusiastically caressed Kobayakawa with his mouth.

Turning his head to one side, he pressed both lips against Kobayakawa, tasting his fill with a loud slurping noise. He didn't use his teeth. When Kobayakawa used to do this for Sawa, he'd used his teeth a lot. Kobayakawa's caresses understood the tense force of pain mixing with pleasure. They were enough to render Sawa senseless.

Sawa knew how vulnerable he was to pleasure. He was only servicing Kobayakawa, but Sawa was so excited he could barely contain himself.

Memories of eight years before awoke in him readily. Sawa fought back the urge to release his lust and stretched out his hand. He touched something hard: Kobayakawa's long legs. He was still wearing his shoes.

"I'm impressed that you're getting hard while you suck me off."

The taunt was barely out of his mouth when Kobayakawa grabbed Sawa's hair roughly and pulled him away from his shaft. The liquid that had gathered on it trailed from Sawa's lips, dripping down his chin. Kobayakawa followed the trail with his tongue and smiled in satisfaction.

Then, with a low laugh, Kobayakawa forced Sawa onto the floor on all fours and stripped away the clothes on his lower body. Then, without so much as a stray touch, he pushed against the place that had guarded its chastity for eight years.

Digging into such a tight space, tearing at it,

Kobayakawa ravaged Sawa's flesh. The powerful rubbing inside his body consumed Sawa.

"Ah! Aggh!" He couldn't suppress the scream that came out of him, and his back arched.

Sawa almost fell, trying to escape the pain in unconsciousness. But Kobayakawa wouldn't allow it; he wrapped his arm around Sawa's neck and pulled him back towards him.

Silver clouds covered his vision and he felt an intense thirst. Dry fingers were shoved into his open mouth and Sawa sucked at them urgently, like a child.

Sawa focused on the stimulation the fingers brought, trying to let the pain of penetration pass over him. They rubbed against the roof of his mouth, the two rhythms in his body slowly reawakening the memory of pleasure.

His entrance stretched to its limit and his flesh began to ripen, drops of liquid swelling from the tip of his organ.

"It's so good you're tightening up. I guess you like it, huh?" Kobayakawa chuckled and pulled his hips away slowly. Sawa felt the thing that had buried itself deep inside him disappearing and he clamped down on it. Only then did Kobayakawa thrust deeply into him again, pushing him open.

"Ahh," Sawa moaned. Even he could hear the bliss in his voice that exposed his pleasure. His member still panted for more inside his underwear, dirtying itself with sticky moisture.

"From this day forward, you are Uzuki Kobayakawa's bitch. Remember that," Kobayakawa

whispered at Sawa's ear as he began a powerful rhythm with his hips. The words were soft and clear, so Sawa would understand them.

"Wh—what?"

"You have no rights."

Sawa turned back to look at Kobayakawa. His eyes fell instead on a camera. It was pointed at the place that joined them.

"Kobayakawa—you—"

Kobayakawa thrust his hips especially hard, and the instant that Sawa's back arched, the shutter clicked.

"And whenever I call you, you're going to come here, legs open. I guess you already know how this is going to work, since you came here today."

"Ahh—hahh—" Sawa moaned passionately, penetrated just a little bit further than before.

"If you ever go against me, I'm going to send this photo to your office. So keep that in mind."

The camera's lens turned on Sawa.

"You turned on me once. It's not going to happen again."

As the words fell down around his ears, Sawa felt slightly dizzy. He heard the click of the camera's shutter, and goose bumps covered his skin.

Their sex lacked even the slightest trace of affection.

Sawa lost count of the number of times the shutter clicked as he was penetrated from behind, like a dog. He found the treatment brutal, but he never thought it was wrong. The vulgarity and cutting insults were all attacks aimed at the Sawa from eight years ago.

Sawa felt everything as if from a distance. Maybe this was atonement for what he did then. If so, and if Kobayakawa could forgive Sawa's betrayal by forcing his crimes back onto him, then he had to repay his debt happily.

Hearing the shutter click again and again, Sawa's thoughts drifted to the past.

It had been summer when he'd turned on Kobayakawa, in their senior year of high school. The sun had been strong that day, more of the same sweltering heat.

Maybe it had all been a dream, borne aloft on the heat of summer.

Chapter Three

“Sorry to keep you here so late.” Sawa’s homeroom teacher Suzushima motioned for him to take a seat. They were in the office.

“It’s okay. I was just going to kill time before my cram courses started.”

“What? You’re taking cram courses? But your grades are so good!”

“I’m not sure colleges will accept me if I only study what they give us in school.” Sawa shrugged at Suzushima’s question. He wondered why his teacher was taking an interest so late in the game.

Sawa’s school was one of the top-ranked private schools in the prefecture, a combined middle school and high school for boys. Each year it turned out multiple students who were accepted to Tokyo University, the top school in the nation, and as a result the school was nationally famous. But the school’s approach was relaxed, so its atmosphere was completely unlike the high-pressure, so-called “elevator” schools that led straight to top universities.

That may also have been due to the fact that the school was somewhat removed from the city: it took two hours by train to reach Tokyo. It was peaceful there, nature blanketing the neighborhood where the school was built, making it possible to appreciate the riches of each season.

His father worked in the mayor's office, and his mother devoted all her time to her work in the local women's league.

Sawa's brother was three years older than him. After graduating from high school, he'd spent a year studying to get into a school in Kansai. He said he intended to follow in their father's footsteps as a civil servant. Sawa was thinking about following the same path as his brother.

"What did you want to talk to me about, Mister Suzushima?" Sawa brought the wandering conversation back on topic.

"A transfer student will be joining our class next week. There are some special circumstances involved."

Sawa sighed without thinking. There must have been some really incredible circumstances if the boy was changing schools this soon before the college exams. "What kind of circumstances?"

"Do you know what the Koryu Alliance is?" Suzushima asked in a lowered voice.

"You mean that big gang—" Sawa started to reply, then gulped. He looked up, incredulous, but Suzushima merely watched him without a word. "I don't care what kind of trouble it would cause. Why are we letting such a problematic student into our school in the first place?"

They were, in some ways, the most prestigious elevator school in the prefecture.

"I'm sure there are a lot of grown-up issues contributing to the situation. I don't know the specifics, but there are rumors that the big cheese of the Koryu Alliance and the chair of the school's board of directors

have a relationship of some kind. So the boss man's son is coming here. And I want you to help him out until he settles in here."

"But why me?"

"Because you're the class representative. Isn't that reason enough?" Suzushima's words invited no argument.

"But I don't know how to deal with the son of a gang family."

"Really? I thought you had friends like that."

"What?"

"You know, the story everyone tells about how you were talking to some bike gang kids in town."

Sawa met Suzushima's prying gaze. He figured out who he was talking about immediately. "They were friends of mine from elementary school. It's not even close to the same thing. These guys belong to the yakuza."

It was true that some of Sawa's friends had joined bike gangs, but only because they had simply loved to ride their motorcycles. Sure, they were happy to pick fights, and Sawa knew they'd gotten into some minor trouble with the police. He didn't approve of it, but when they were with Sawa, they were nothing more than guys he'd played with in elementary school.

"In any case, I expect that you'll be friendly and not judge him. You're a nice guy who says what needs to be said."

"How can you just order me to—"

"I realize how tyrannical this seems. I can assure you at least that he's not the kind of guy to fly off the

handle for nothing. Anyway, grown-up circumstances or no, he passed the placement exam."

"Mister Suzushima!"

"I'm trusting you with this. You're a reliable boy."

Suzushima's words weighed Sawa's heart down heavily.

"There's someone here to see you, Mister Suzushima," someone called from the entrance to the office.

"That means he's here. We'll discuss the rest later."

"But you can't just force me to—"

"Oh, sorry. I forgot the most important thing." Suzushima jumped to his feet, then turned back around and scribbled something on a scrap of paper.

"The boy's name is Uzuki Kobayakawa. Thanks a lot," Suzushima said as he hurried out of the office.

A man in a navy blue two-piece suit was standing in front of the open door. He had the look of an intellectual, his hair in a crisp off-center part and wearing glasses, but there was something about him that was not at all like Suzushima.

Sawa only caught a glimpse of him from a distance, so he couldn't tell for sure, but he picked up on the tense ambiance surrounding the man.

"You have been a great help," he faintly heard someone say in a flat, lifeless voice. The door closed and Sawa, left alone in the office, gazed down at the note.

"Uzuki Kobayakawa."

The transfer student with bad timing and special

circumstances who was going to give him so much trouble. Sawa repeated the name several times.

"What does that mean, I'm 'reliable'?" Sawa muttered as he headed back to the classroom to get his bag. He had been eager to help in the past, but at this time of year, with the exams were looming, Sawa wanted to avoid getting wrapped up in time-consuming things. But that didn't mean that he could turn down Suzushima's request once he'd made it.

All he could do now was pray that this new student wasn't going to be any trouble.

"He didn't even listen to me."

Sawa glanced at his watch. He'd felt like he'd been in the office a long time, but it had only been about thirty minutes.

"There's probably no one left here this late."

How am I going to kill the time before cram school?

Sawa wondered. He opened the door to the classroom, then froze.

He'd thought no one would be there. But there was a man sitting at a desk next to the window. He was silhouetted against the light of the setting sun. Then Sawa's nostrils caught the smell of tobacco. Classes were over for the day, so there was no telling when a teacher might walk by. And anyway, it was just insane to be smoking in a classroom.

"If someone catches you smoking here, they'll do more than just expel you," Sawa said automatically, shutting the door behind him.

"Who're you?" a baritone voice replied.

"Isn't it usually considered more polite to give your own name before you ask someone else for theirs?" Sawa shot back. He put his hands on his hips and took a slow step forward. As the angle of the sunlight changed, he was able to make out the man sitting at the desk.

His long legs were stretched across a desk, and he was wearing jeans, not a uniform. In his hands he held a cigarette and a paperback novel. Sawa recognized the cover and realized that it was the book he had left on his desk.

It was Camus' *The Stranger*. When he was leaving his house, he had slipped it into his bag to give to a friend at school. He'd bought it in middle school, but no matter how often Sawa read it, he couldn't figure out what was so great about it.

"My name is Sawa and I'm the class representative. And while we're on the subject, that's my book."

"Sorry. It was just lying here, so I picked it up to kill some time."

The boy took the cigarette from his mouth and apologized more readily than Sawa had expected. He swung his legs down from the desk and stood up.

Even from a distance, Sawa could tell he was tall. His legs were long; he almost had the proportions of a model. As the boy walked slowly toward him, Sawa gasped at his good looks.

The profile of his thin face showed a perfectly straight nose. Below his well-shaped eyebrows, his slanted eyes shone sharply, with a powerful light. Those eyes were now turned on Sawa, who stood before them.

He didn't recognize this remarkably handsome man with the perfect, angular features.

"Here," he said roughly, holding out the book.

"Do you like reading?"

"Nope," the boy replied without hesitation. "I was only reading your book because of the sun."

"Naturally," Sawa said somewhat sarcastically, arching an eyebrow momentarily. He reached out to take the book back.

In *The Stranger*, the lead character killed someone and said that he did it "because of the sun." This man no doubt knew that when he responded the way he did.

Sawa was impressed by his comeback. "And I bet you're going to say you're smoking in here because of the sun, too?"

"No way." The man had changed position and was obscured by the sunlight once again. "I'm smoking because I want to."

He offered the cigarette he held between his fingers to Sawa. Feeling pressured, Sawa took the cigarette between his lips and the distinctive smoke of tobacco billowed into his nostrils and lungs.

Sawa began coughing, and the man took the cigarette back from him, taking a drag as if it were second nature to him. "You've never smoked before?"

"Of course not."

Sawa squinted at him with watery eyes, but the man just laughed at him. He slapped Sawa on the shoulder and walked past him.

The spicy scent of cologne blended with the intoxicating smoke of the tobacco, sending a shudder

down Sawa's spine. This smell was clearly unlike that of his classmates. It was the smell of a man.

"There you are, Uzuki."

They heard a lifeless monotone in the hallway and Sawa's breath caught. It sounded like the voice he'd just heard in the office.

"Yeah, I'm coming."

At the easy way the man responded, Sawa began to connect the dots.

"See ya."

The man gave an off-handed wave as he headed into the hall. Sawa rushed after him impulsively. "Wait!"

Sawa caught up to the man, but also the man in the suit that he'd seen with Suzushima in the office. He was sure of it. There was something imposing about him, more apparent now up close, perhaps because of the breadth of his shoulders in the two-piece suit. And there was, like before, something about him that was unlike other people.

That must be him: the transfer student Suzushima told him about. But he needed to hear him say it.

"So you just demand people's names, then refuse to give your own?"

The man stood crookedly, one hand in his pocket, and looked down at Sawa with a strong gaze. Sawa fell silent at the penetrating power of his eyes.

"And who are you?"

The man in the suit pushed up the bridge of his glasses as he took a step forward, but the other man blocked him with a hand. "You shut up."

"But, Uzuki—"

"Let it go!"

A shudder went up Sawa's spine at the powerful dignity in his voice as he warned back the man who seemed much older than himself. Without thinking, even Sawa stood a little straighter. The man in the suit said nothing more and, without changing his expression, he wordlessly acknowledged the situation and took a step back.

"You're pretty cute, for a boy," the man whispered, gazing at Sawa's face in complete seriousness.

"What—?"

"Uzuki." Sawa's heart pounded as the man gave him his name. "Uzuki Kobayakawa. I'm transferring to this school next week. Maybe you'll get to be my representative."

The man paid no attention to Sawa's surprise and simply gave a slight smile before turning his back.

The following Monday, there was a strange excitement in the air when Sawa arrived at the classroom a little late.

"You're late, Sawa."

"I overslept."

For some reason he'd had trouble sleeping the night before. He'd started reading a book and wound up finishing it. Of course, by that time it was starting to get light outside, and the sunlight coming through the gap in the curtains had made him feel light-headed.

Sawa's seat was next to the window in the back of the class. It was one desk back from where he'd found

Kobayakawa sitting. Soichi Takaoka, who'd just spoken to him, sat in that seat. He was a huge guy; he'd played with the rugby team until the beginning of spring.

"I heard we're getting a new kid today. From Tokyo."

Sawa looked up. "I know."

He had been unable to forget about it ever since Suzushima had talked to him. Even though he was swamped studying for exams and doing school work, he couldn't get Kobayakawa's face out of his mind.

Especially those eyes of his, that had such power to penetrate people's souls. That wasn't something easily forgotten. Sawa had never met anyone with eyes like that before.

"Remember how Suzushima wanted to see me after school last week? He told me about it then."

"Then you know about him?"

"Know what?"

"Apparently he's the heir to a yakuza family!"

Sawa wrinkled his forehead at that. He hadn't told anyone that, but apparently word spread fast.

"Do you know if it's true that the reason he left his last school was because he got a girl pregnant?"

His words sent a chill down Sawa's spine.

"Someone was in the office just before the new kid came in and he got a look at him. He said he was really good looking. I bet girls were throwing themselves at him."

Takaoka was abandoning himself to his curiosity. That was probably behind all the excitement in the classroom.

"I knew he couldn't just be some regular guy if he was changing schools at a time like this."

"What do you mean, you knew?" For some reason, Sawa felt anger swelling in the pit of his stomach.

"I just figured guys from Tokyo would be different from guys like us and—"

"You can't just decide what's true and what's not when you don't know anything about a person." He slammed his hands down on his desk and pushed himself to his feet suddenly. The noise of the room fell away in an instant at Sawa's menacing voice. "That goes for the rest of you, too! You haven't even met this guy. Don't make judgments about people when all you've got are a bunch of speculations and rumors. That's an order! Am I clear?"

"What's up with you, Sawa?" Takaoka whispered to Sawa as he sat back in his chair. He was still worked up. Before he could answer, the door at the front of the room slid open.

"Everyone's so quiet today." Suzushima came into the room with a suspicious look on his face, dressed in a grey suit jacket. A hush fell over the room, as if they were obeying Sawa's words. "I usually can't even hear myself shouting in here, you're so loud. You must not be feeling good if you're this quiet."

Suzushima stood at his desk in the front of the room and did the roll call as usual.

"And Yasuda's absent. That completes the roll. Well, I'm sure you all are already aware of this, but we have a new student. Come in, Kobayakawa."

Shoulders squared, Kobayakawa's eyes swept over

the room irritably, and the class grew uneasy.

"This is our new student, Uzuki Kobayakawa. Kobayakawa, I'm going to let our class representative take care of the rest. Sawa, raise your hand."

Tension thrilled through Sawa's body when Suzushima called on him. "Here, sir."

"Your seat is next to him. If you have questions about electives or anything else, he'll help you."

"Okay," Kobayakawa replied flippantly and walked straight for Sawa. He didn't pay any attention to the stares of the students on either side of him. He arrived at the desk that had been prepared for him.

"Hi, I'm Junya Sawa."

Sawa extended his hand to Kobayakawa, not daring to mention the last time they'd seen each other. But Kobayakawa didn't react beyond sparing Sawa a glance. He flopped into his seat and turned away from him.

"Sawa, do you—" Takaoka started to turn around, but Sawa kicked the bottom of his seat.

"You don't have your textbooks yet, right? You can share mine for now." Sawa moved his desk next to Kobayakawa's and put his book between them. But Kobayakawa put his elbow on the desk and refused to look at him.

Sawa could barely see his profile, but it was expressionless. Sawa wrinkled his eyebrows and pursed his lips tightly. He felt like Kobayakawa's elbow was on the table so he could avoid looking at him out of pure stubbornness, and that annoyed him.

"Let's get started. Open your books to page 63 and—" From his desk at the front of the room,



Suzushima was beginning the class. He stood in front of the board and wrote numbers in chalk.

Kobayakawa turned his face to the front, but he wasn't watching the board or the teacher.

Sawa stared at the side of his face, then suddenly shoved Kobayakawa's elbow out from under him. Kobayakawa's chin slammed into the desk after the unexpected blow.

"Ow!"

A surprisingly loud bang echoed through the room.

"What are you doing, Sawa?" Takaoka muttered warningly. He and the student next to Kobayakawa turned to look at them at the same time. They were dumbfounded by the pitiful sight of Kobayakawa's head planted on his desk.

"S-sorry."

Sawa had only jabbed his elbow at Kobayakawa to make him pay attention to him. At the most he'd thought he'd knock his hand away from his head. He'd never imagined that Kobayakawa's chin would bang so hard into the desk.

Agonizing over what he should do, Sawa decided to try apologizing.

"What do you mean, 'sorry'?" Kobayakawa lifted his head, his hand pressed against his lips. "Try not doing something stupid in the first place if you're just going to apologize for it afterwards."

Kobayakawa's angry voice rang out through the classroom. The students had been watching the board until then, but they all turned to look at Kobayakawa and

Sawa to see what was going on. And so did Suzushima.

"What's going on back there?"

"He's bleeding!" Sawa interrupted Suzushima, who was coming to investigate.

"Bleeding?"

"Yes, Kobayakawa is bleeding."

Sawa stood up immediately and grabbed Kobayakawa's chin.

The sound of his chair hitting the floor made a garish noise. Not yet grasping the situation, Kobayakawa stared into Sawa's eyes, his chin held firmly in Sawa's hand.

"Oh my god, you're right! It's a bloodbath!"

Takaoka was also peering over to see what had happened and he frowned. "It looks pretty bad, Kobayakawa. Did you bite your tongue or something?"

"Sorry. I hit his chin."

Sawa hurriedly pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and pushed it forcefully against Kobayakawa's mouth.

"What're you doing?" Kobayakawa tore the handkerchief away. He shoved it back at Sawa, but he frowned when he saw how red it was.

"There, now do you get it? Mister Suzushima, I'll take Kobayakawa to the nurse."

"Good idea."

"Give me a break. This is nothing! I've—"

The taste of blood must have been spreading through his mouth as he talked. Kobayakawa went quiet, an uneasy look on his face.

"You want me to go, too, Sawa?" Takaoka asked,

looking worried.

"No, it's okay. Let's go, Kobayakawa."

Kobayakawa nodded reluctantly.

Kobayakawa didn't say a word until they reached the nurse's office.

"Are you there, sir? It's Sawa, from the senior class."

Sawa tapped on the door, but there was no answer.

"What's up?" The handkerchief pressed against Kobayakawa's mouth muffled his voice.

Sawa searched the office and found a note on the nurse's desk. "It says 'back in thirty minutes.'"

"Then let's go back to class."

"We can't do that. Here, gargle and then spit out all the blood in your mouth."

Kobayakawa obeyed Sawa's instructions for the time being, gargling with the water available in the office. The first time he spat, the water was bright red.

"Wow." Sawa pulled away from the sight quickly and Kobayakawa raised his eyebrows.

"Don't act so grossed out by a little blood." Kobayakawa glared at Sawa pointedly out of the corner of his eyes.

"Yeah, well, you got pretty pale, too, when you saw the blood on the handkerchief," Sawa shot back. "But I can't handle blood...."

Kobayakawa's eyes widened momentarily, then he looked like he was going to burst out laughing, even though he still had water in his mouth.

He managed to spit the water out and then doubled over with laughter. "Don't make me laugh when I've got water in my mouth, man."

"Did I say something funny?"

"Nah, it's just you're the first person who wasn't too afraid to talk back to me."

Once Kobayakawa had had a good laugh, he finally stood back up. Feeling Kobayakawa's direct gaze on his face, Sawa's heart pounded like never before.

"It wasn't anything special."

"I guess not. But I'm a special person," Kobayakawa grinned. The superior slant of his smile annoyed Sawa and he glared up at Kobayakawa's face.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He yanked on Kobayakawa's arm and forced him to sit down, then took cotton and disinfectant from a drawer in the nurse's desk. He started searching for gauze and tweezers. "I'm not discounting the possibility that you've got a high-tech robot body under your artificial skin."

"I guess it's sort of like that." Sawa was a little startled by how calmly Kobayakawa responded to his joking suggestion. "At least, I bet everyone else in the class would buy it."

"Why not me?"

"Don't make judgments about people when all you've got are a bunch of speculations and rumors. That's an order! Was that it?"

Kobayakawa mimicked Sawa's speech to the letter, even his pronunciation. Sawa flushed bright red. "You heard that?"

"How could I not? You were screaming. I bet they heard you in the classes next door, too."

"Oh god. This sucks."

Sawa groaned. He put all the supplies he'd gathered on a tray and sat down in front of Kobayakawa.

"What, upset about having to baby-sit the new kid?"

"That's not what I meant."

Sawa glanced back at the shelves, wondering if he should swab the inside of Kobayakawa's mouth with oxydol. After a careful search, he finally found some canker sore medicine.

"What did you mean, then?"

"Could you open your mouth for me?"

"Open my mouth?"

"Let me see the cut. Do you still taste blood?"

"I told you I'm fine. What's so bad about a little blood?"

"It's not good for you. Now let me do this."

Sawa reached out obstinately for Kobayakawa's chin, but Kobayakawa shook him off. Sawa reached out again and was shaken off once more. This back-and-forth continued for several seconds, but Kobayakawa's temper was shorter than Sawa's.

"I said I'm fine!" Kobayakawa grabbed Sawa's wrist and yanked him toward him furiously.

"Hey!" Sawa lost his balance at this completely unexpected development. His body followed his hand, and he fell forward, colliding with Kobayakawa's chest. "Wha-what the hell?"

Apparently Kobayakawa hadn't expected that to

happen, either. He lost his balance and fell flat on his back on the floor, Sawa caught up in his arms.

"Agh!"

There was a dull thud, and Sawa felt an intense pain in his forehead. He pressed his hands against it.

"Are you okay?"

"I banged my head."

Sawa rolled onto his back to take stock of the situation.

"Why did you do that?"

"You didn't have to knock me over, too, you know." Kobayakawa glowered and pushed himself up off the floor. He also pulled away the arm supporting Sawa's head. Seeing him casually remove his arm, Sawa suddenly realized that Kobayakawa had protected him.

A scent of tobacco came to his nose.

"Is your arm okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine. I barely hit it."

He rolled his head around casually and frowned for only an instant. Sawa was trembling with shock, but as soon as Kobayakawa noticed, he quickly waved his fears away. "I think my mouth started bleeding again. That's all. Sorry."

Complaining about the taste, Kobayakawa stood up briskly and went to spit the blood out in the sink. Sawa picked himself up as the sound of rushing water filled the room.

"Sorry."

"Whatever. It was bound to happen," Kobayakawa said again since Sawa looked like a kicked puppy.

"But it's my fault you're bleeding, and now—"

"It's fine. This is nothing compared to your bad luck having to baby-sit me just because you're the class representative." Kobayakawa set the chair back on its feet and sat down again.

"Kobayakawa—"

"You've heard all about how my dad is the head of a gang, right?" Kobayakawa asked with a rueful smile as he slipped a cigarette out of his jacket pocket as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Just as he was placing it in his mouth, Sawa tore it away from him.

"What're you doing? You want one too?"

"I've never smoked and I'm not going to," Sawa snapped, grabbing the pack that was still in Kobayakawa's hand and throwing it into the trash. "I told you already: if you get caught smoking in school, you'll get expelled."

"Not the first time."

"So you smoke because you want to. Well, that's not good enough until you're an adult." Sawa suddenly stuck his tongue out at Kobayakawa. "And are you trying to impress me by telling me your dad's the leader of a gang? Does that make you part of the gang, too, since you're his son?"

"I—"

"I don't care if you are. This is a school, and in school you follow the school's rules. That's how it is in a gang, right? Plus, you're new here. Until you get used to how we do things here, you'd better just shut up and do what I tell you."

Sawa let loose everything he had been wanting to say. Finally he ran out of breath and, though his

shoulders heaved, he didn't turn his eyes away from Kobayakawa. Kobayakawa looked Sawa in the face for a long moment, but finally spluttered as if he couldn't hold it back anymore and burst into laughter.

Sawa's jaw dropped. He had no idea why Kobayakawa was laughing at him.

"You're so weird," Kobayakawa said, holding his stomach and laughing.

"I am not. All I did was tell the truth," he answered, trying to sound indignant, but inside Sawa was relieved.

He had been trying to ignore it, but the words "mobster's son" flashed through his mind anyway. Who knew what might happen to him if he said the wrong thing? This was exactly why he didn't want to be responsible for things like this. Even though he sounded like he was in control, the truth was that doubts like that plagued him.

But as he watched the boy laugh, all of his stereotypes and prejudices disappeared.

Kobayakawa might have had some rough habits and he spoke a little crudely, but Sawa realized that he was just a high school student like himself.

"All I said was that this sucked."

"Yeah, that. I think it's pretty awful, too." He didn't sound obviously self-pitying when he said it, but that made it all the more painful to hear.

"Just so you know, I wasn't talking about having to look after you," Sawa corrected him.

"Then what were you talking about?" Kobayakawa turned to look Sawa straight in the face. His eyes focused on Sawa, seeming to pierce his soul.

"The fact that people overheard me yelling."

"You mean because I heard you? Who cares? It's the truth, after all."

"But that's not what I meant." He vehemently denied Kobayakawa's interpretation.

"Sawa, what—?"

"I don't know what your story is. But whatever it is, now that you're wearing our school uniform, you belong here. There's less than a year before graduation so we don't have much time. But during what little time we do have, I'd like to be your friend." He wasn't saying what he really meant, but Sawa tried to express himself as best he could.

When Suzushima had talked to him about Kobayakawa, he had assumed it would be a pain. He had enough of his own problems to deal with right now with the exams approaching. He didn't understand why he was being forced to take care of someone else, either. It was supposed to be "until he got used to the school," but given the context, Sawa had figured it might wind up being impossible for Kobayakawa to adapt if things went badly.

But after their chance encounter last week, there was something about Kobayakawa he found interesting. It wasn't just the audacity of so casually lighting up a cigarette in the classroom. The strength of Kobayakawa's eyes when he looked at Sawa exerted some powerful pull over his heart.

He didn't care if Kobayakawa was the son of a yakuza family or anything else. He wanted to know more about Kobayakawa the individual.

A vague impulse was growing now inside Sawa. But no matter how he tried to express his feelings, they came out sounding like lies.

Sawa's head drooped in frustration at being unable to convey his feelings and he squeezed his hands into tight fists.

"You're a really strange guy."

"You think so?"

Kobayakawa shrugged at Sawa's question. "At my last school, everyone stayed away from me. They said they didn't want anything to do with a guy like me. Everyone believed the stuff about my dad and all the rumors about me, and no one ever tried to see me for myself."

Sitting in the chair, Kobayakawa drew his legs up and hugged them to his chest.

"That didn't bug me. I'm not ashamed of being my father's son. I'm probably going to follow in his footsteps when I graduate. You asked me if I'm a gangster, too, just because I'm the son of a gang leader. In my case, I think I am. So I decided that I really didn't care about school. But some really annoying guy kept telling me that I should go to school while I still can. So I decided I would just go until graduation to get him off my back."

There was no trace of self-pity in his voice. Kobayakawa sounded rather detached as he spoke.

"But once I saw you, I thought maybe it wouldn't be so bad going to school."

"Really?" Sawa asked cautiously.

"I thought, yeah, why not have some good

memories for a change?" Kobayakawa gave a bashful smile. Sawa's heart beat faster and his cheeks grew hot at this, the first smile he had ever seen on Kobayakawa's face. He had never suspected that this man could possess such a gentle smile. The powerful light of his eyes felt kind now, seeming to wrap itself around Sawa's soul.

Sawa's nose suddenly caught the scent of Kobayakawa's cologne. It was unlike anything he had smelled before—the scent of a man.

Sawa stared at Kobayakawa. Maybe he could stand a little closer. They weren't gazing at each other impersonally, but as one human being to another. Just as he started to take a step forward, the door to the nurse's office clattered open.

"Huh? What are you doing here, Sawa?"

Sawa froze instantly and turned to look at the person who'd spoken. The nurse was standing in the doorway, wearing a white jacket. The nurse, a beanpole wearing glasses, looked at Sawa in annoyance.

"Uh, he—he hit his chin. His mouth is bleeding."

"I don't recognize him. But oh yes, now I remember. Mister Suzushima told me about the new student that was coming."

The nurse searched his desktop until he found a penlight, then came to stand in front of Kobayakawa.

"Where are you hurt?"

He brusquely took hold of Kobayakawa's chin and turned his face up disapprovingly.

"It's fine now."

"I'll be the one to decide that, thank you. Now open up and don't bother with the marble-mouth impression.

Or is there a problem? Are you embarrassed to open your mouth, like a little girl?"

It looked like the nurse's deliberately insults had worked perfectly to skewer Kobayakawa's pride.

"Who are you calling a girl?"

"In that case, can you open your mouth nice and wide for me? That's a good boy."

Acting like a dentist with a little kid, the nurse managed to get Kobayakawa to open his mouth without difficulty. He was shining the penlight inside Kobayakawa's mouth when Kobayakawa finally realized that he had played right into the nurse's hands. But it was too late to just shut his mouth again at that point, so he put up with it diligently, though he made some choking noises at the back of his throat.

"Ah, there it is. You probably caught it on the edge of a tooth. That must have hurt. I bet there was a lot of blood."

"Yes, there was," Sawa answered for Kobayakawa, who had fallen silent.

"So what happened?"

"He was resting his chin on his hand and I knocked his elbow out from under him."

"I see."

"Then he hit his chin on the desk."

"And that's how he cut his mouth?"

The nurse was looking at him with a straight face, but his hands began to tremble.

"Stop laughing!"

Kobayakawa looked like he was running out of patience. He had endured everything up to that point,

but now he knocked the nurse's hands away. When he yelled at him, the nurse doubled over, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Uh, sir?"

"It's so funny that a slick guy like him would hurt himself so badly just hitting his chin on a desk." The nurse couldn't hold back his laughter any longer. He clutched his stomach and guffawed.

"That's real nice, laughing at other people's pain like that," Kobayakawa said, aggravated, and stood up to leave the nurse's office.

"Hey, Kobayakawa! Wait!"

"I've had enough of his treatment."

The voice of the nurse came from behind Sawa, struggling to suppress his laughter. "But your medicine—"

Kobayakawa left the room before he managed to finish.

"His bleeding's stopped, so it's all right. If it takes another impact, the bleeding might start again, so he shout avoid eating hard things as much as possible. Will you tell him that?"

"All right."

Sawa bowed politely and chased after Kobayakawa, who had gotten a good lead on him.

Chapter Four

Two months after Kobayakawa arrived, Sawa was invited to his house for the first time.

It was on the top floor of a luxury high-rise condominium building that didn't seem to belong in the town. The foyer alone was more than thirty-five square feet, its floor inlaid with high-quality marble. A cabinet of shoes covered one entire wall, from floor to ceiling. An enormous room contained both a sofa set and dining table. An expensive lamp hung from the ceiling and shelves lined the wall, all black and modern. In the dining room, there was a full dinner service; in the living room, a television and stereo system.

Sawa sat on the sofa hesitantly and found that it was fluffy, seeming to mold itself to the shape of his hips. He hugged one of the downy cushions to his chest and leaned back. The room's temperature was set comfortably, and a faint scent of flowers wafted in, though he couldn't see its source.

Sawa suspected that model homes must have been like this, though he had never been to one. It was undeniably beautiful, but he felt that it was somehow empty of life.

The floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over the tiny town. Sawa propped his legs up while he waited, and Kobayakawa stuck his head out of the kitchen.

"Sorry, this is all we've got."

He set a bag of chips and, amazingly, an armload of beer cans on the coffee table.

"What's with the beer?"

"I didn't have any choice. We don't have anything to drink besides beer."

"No. No way. Why do you think I came here?"

Kobayakawa sat down on the sofa and pulled open a can of beer. "I thought you came over to play."

"Idiot." Sawa tossed a nearby cushion at Kobayakawa. But Kobayakawa tilted his head to one side and easily dodged it.

"You know I'm going out of my way to be here at such an important time because you said the finals were going to be on some things you didn't understand and that you needed my help."

Sawa thumped on the table as he spoke.

"Are you sure?"

"Don't play dumb!"

Ever since he'd transferred in, Kobayakawa's attitude had been consistent. He didn't act especially tough, but he didn't show even the most basic interest in his surroundings and hardly ever initiated conversations with other people. In one of his elective classes, apparently even the teacher was so cowed by the aura that Kobayakawa gave off that he never called on him.

And the attitude of his classmates hadn't changed.

Sawa's order on the first day seemed to have had an effect, and no one spread rumors about Kobayakawa openly. But he noticed that Kobayakawa's persona was snowballing and gaining influence.

Sawa had thought it was high school girls who were supposed to love to gossip, but it was exactly the same at his all-boys school.

Sawa kept trying to bring Kobayakawa into the fold by greeting him in the halls or by taking him places, but he could only do that if Kobayakawa attended school. If he didn't bother to come, Sawa wouldn't even have been able to do that much.

He wasn't in elementary school anymore, so Sawa held himself back from interfering in every little thing, but with the end of the semester looming, Suzushima had called him over for a private conference.

"If Kobayakawa keeps this up, he won't be able to graduate."

Sawa rushed into action after hearing what he had long suspected. *During what little time we do have, I'd like to be your friend*, he'd said before with such charm, but if Kobayakawa didn't graduate then it was meaningless.

What would he do? He found it impossible to believe that he would just bravely go back to school the next year if he were held back.

That was why Sawa decided to do whatever he could to make sure they graduated together, and he didn't care if he made a nuisance of himself.

The first step was to study for the exams.

"Seriously. It's only gotten this bad because you hardly ever go to class."

Sawa set the beer can he'd taken from Kobayakawa on the table and sat back down on the sofa.

"After your score on the midterm, if you fail again

at the end of semester, it's going to be hard for you to graduate. Do you get that?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Kobayakawa casually started to open the other beer that he had brought for Sawa. Sawa moved quickly to take it again, but this time Kobayakawa got out of the way.

"Kobayakawa!"

"Who cares if I have a little beer? Aren't you thirsty?"

As if there was nothing in the world to feel guilty about, Kobayakawa popped the can open with a hiss and chugged its contents loudly. Sawa's eyes were drawn to the way his Adam's apple leapt up and down as he drank.

Kobayakawa wasn't at all muscular. But he looked toned compared to Sawa, who was simply frail rather than skinny because he had never exercised at all outside of P.E. in middle and high school.

Sawa had become especially aware of that since they'd switched to their summer uniforms in June.

Whenever Kobayakawa casually bent his arm, his biceps would flex naturally. Sawa was constantly struck by the urge to touch them. He would always be overcome by a feeling of shame, suspecting that there was something weird about that impulse, but the same thing would happen again the next time.

"What's up? You sure you don't want a beer after all?"

Sawa had fallen silent, and Kobayakawa was

peering at him. He was so surprised by the proximity of Kobayakawa's face that he couldn't even breathe. But he held his feelings in check and tersely replied, "It's not that."

"Why you gotta be so uptight? There's no one here but you and me." Kobayakawa set his beer down and pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pants pocket, from which he extracted a similarly crumpled cigarette.

Sawa hated how good Kobayakawa looked lighting the cigarette with a cheap disposable lighter and blowing the smoke up at the ceiling.

"Really?"

"You're not still surprised by that, are you? My mom and dad are in Tokyo. I got in trouble at the school near us, so I came to my dad's old town by myself."

Usually Sawa forgot all about it, but he was struck now by how very different Kobayakawa's background was from his own. "I thought you had a guardian or something with you the first time we met. He doesn't live with you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The tall guy with the glasses. He had his hair parted to one side."

"Oh, Iwatsuki. You've got a good memory." Kobayakawa's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "He only came to the school that one time."

"I saw him for a second in the office, too."

The man's aura had been unique, unlike an ordinary citizen's, though that was kind of a strange way to put it. Judging purely from appearances, he could probably

pass as an office worker. He was nothing like the classic image of the yakuza that was always on TV and in movies, the kind who didn't care about life or honor.

But perhaps because he was, after all, part of the underworld, there was something about his eyes that seemed different from other people's. But the only gangsters Sawa knew about were the prototypical yakuza from TV and movies. Most "modern" gang members were probably not like this man, either.

"He's my guardian. He's been working for my dad since before I was born. He's kind of my lieutenant."

"Your lieutenant?"

Sawa didn't understand exactly what that meant his job duties were, but he'd heard the term so often in movies that even Sawa knew it was the title of a very important position.

"My dad picked him up when he was young and helped raise him, so Iwatsuki said he would pay back that debt with his body. He's a lifer. He's not a bad guy. Plus, he sees situations really clearly, so it's really great to talk to him about stuff. But it kind of sucks how formal he can be." As he listed off Iwatsuki's qualities and flaws, Kobayakawa truly looked his age. "Sometimes he sticks his head in to see how I'm doing on the weekends, but he's usually busy with stuff in Tokyo. There's nothing to do for fun in a backwater town like this. He hated it as soon as he got here."

"But he's working too hard to actually have any fun, isn't he?"

"I guess. But if he wanted to, he wouldn't have anything to do."

The ash had grown long on his cigarette. Kobayakawa stretched his arm out to flick it into his can, even though there was an ashtray right next to him.

"There's downtown, by the train station, or the club in the second district..."

"Who wants to go some place that's full of kids?" Kobayakawa waved his hand dismissively in front of his face.

"What do you mean, kids?"

"Middle schoolers. I even saw some elementary school kids there. Man, you couldn't get it up with girls like that if you tried."

Goose bumps prickled Sawa's skin at these evocative words coming out of nowhere.

"And that was just like Iwatsuki to stick me in an all-boys school. Nothing but guys everywhere you look. It sucks. What's the point of even going to school and paying attention when it's like that? Isn't that right, Sawa?"

"Wh-what?" Sawa responded awkwardly after the surprise of being called by name.

Kobayakawa turned a dubious look on him and laughed, "Pay attention! I said, don't you think it's frustrating going to a school full of guys?"

"Not really..."

Sawa remembered the rumor about why Kobayakawa had left his other school.

He was such a handsome man. Plus he was smart and could play sports. In the end, he was a man of few words, but that didn't mean he was unfriendly.

Sawa's thoughts continued along this track. He

decided, even if it was a bit nonsensical, that no girl would ever let go of this bold man who paid no attention to what other people thought of him.

And it wasn't just girls.

Since Sawa's school was all boys, they didn't get any truly outrageous rumors, but there were people among them who liked boys. He'd heard that those boys, too, found Kobayakawa appealing.

Sawa did, too. His pulse quickened under Kobayakawa's direct gaze.

"Sawa?"

"Time to hit the books." Sawa stood up, trying to banish his confusion.

"I don't feel like it."

"Quit complaining and sit over there. Where's your dictionary? You must have one. Go find it for us."

"You're acting like some soccer mom."

"Is that what you want from me, Uzuki? All I want is for you to be happy," Sawa answered in a caricature of motherly suffering.

"Ugh, that's creepy." Kobayakawa made a face and left the room.

Left by himself, Sawa let out a sigh of relief. He was pretty sure Kobayakawa hadn't heard the wild pounding in his chest. The very thought started his heart beating at an even quicker pace.

He didn't clearly understand why that would be. It was only when he was alone with Kobayakawa that he got so excited. And in an effort to keep him from realizing it, Sawa had acted much too sternly and said things that were completely unnecessary.

"What am I doing? Things have been weird ever since I first met Kobayakawa."

Sawa tried to remember when his strange behavior had begun. He could trace it back to that first time they'd met in the classroom. Meeting Kobayakawa's penetrating eyes and catching his masculine scent, so unlike that of all his other friends—that was the beginning, when Sawa had first felt so fascinated by and curious about that "something" that he had never experienced before.

In the two months since then, Sawa had seen a lot more of Kobayakawa's true nature. He may have had a rough and arrogant way of speaking, but he wasn't really a bad person. Of course, Sawa had never seen him outside school, but he thought he could imagine what it would be like.

Kobayakawa seemed to be the type of person who believed he was stronger than anything. That let him believe that he could achieve anything. Sawa had picked up on that during the midterms. Kobayakawa had turned in blank answer sheets for every subject. Sawa had noticed it the first day and he'd suggested that they could study together for the next day's subjects, even if it was only for a few minutes. But Kobayakawa had ignored him.

He only found out the reason for this recklessness later.

Apparently some people in their class had said that the reason Kobayakawa passed the placement exams was because someone had passed him the answers. And since he would know the answers for these tests ahead of

time, too, he was bound to get a good grade.

The students should have known better than anyone that he would never get away with such a thing. Sawa was sure that the people spreading the rumors had started them because they were jealous, or for some other stupid reason. Once he'd heard the rumor, Kobayakawa took their bait about the tests with his simplistic honesty.

When he found out why, Sawa had called Kobayakawa an idiot. He'd demanded to know why he had done something so childish. Kobayakawa had answered readily that they had gotten on his nerves. Common sense seemed to dictate that not many people would have done something like that, even if they were annoyed, but Kobayakawa was true to his word.

At the same time that Kobayakawa's impulsive goodness shocked Sawa, he admired him for it—for whatever made him capable of doing it, and whatever made him the way he was. Sawa had suffered a lot of other trivial surprises, too. Nothing was worth giving as an example, but they all combined to form something much bigger.

Before he knew it, Sawa's interest in Kobayakawa and his curiosity about him had only continued to grow, swelling gradually. That was why he reacted more than necessary to the things he said and did.

When Sawa reached this conclusion, Kobayakawa came back carrying a dictionary.

"Sorry I took so long."

"What were you doing? That was a pretty long time to find a dictionary." Sawa was a little annoyed at Kobayakawa's breezy comment.

"I never use it, so I didn't know where it was."

He plopped down onto the wooden floor instead of the sofa and crossed his legs, but then immediately raised his right knee.

"Okay, let's get going. I remembered that there's a TV show I want to watch at ten."

It was near four o'clock. That left six hours until the show, but considering Kobayakawa's situation, it didn't seem like much. Was he serious about studying or not?

"Quit goofing around and open your book." Sawa was getting tired of pushing him. He pulled a notebook and his English book out of his bag. "First I'm going to show you the study guide, so mark the stuff in your book."

"Aw, man."

And for the next hour and a half, though he complained about everything under the sun, Kobayakawa listened earnestly to Sawa's instruction. He had the basics down, so all that was left was memorizing the vocabulary.

"Next we'll do some exercises."

Kobayakawa looked up suddenly. "Hold on a second. I need a break."

"If you have time for a break, you'd be better off memorizing an extra grammar rule."

"I can't, I'm hungry. I can't think with low blood sugar."

"Quit it." Sawa smiled grimly. They weren't being very efficient, even without taking a break, but Sawa was hungry, too. "But whatever, we can take a break."

We probably should eat."

"See? I know a good diner nearby, and it even delivers. Let's get that."

Kobayakawa was smiling, as content as a child, and he got up excitedly. He pulled open a drawer in a cabinet and rummaged around until he found the menu.

"Their tempura is really good. It comes with Kansai-style udon or white rice. They have salad, too. Get whatever you want."

"Oh wow, I just can't decide."

"Well, if you can't decide on one thing, just order two or three. We're going to get hungry tonight. Speaking of which, you can sleep over if you want." Kobayakawa made the offer with a carefree smile.

"Sleep over?" Sawa's heart was pounding again.

"School's not that far from here. And since the test is tomorrow, you're not going to need your books or anything."

"That's true, but—"

Thump.

"What's up? Why are you making a face like that? It's not like you're staying at a girl's house. What's the problem?"

Thump, thump.

"Oh, I guess your parents are strict, huh?"

"They're pretty average, I think." Sawa's heart was pounding so loudly. He felt like flames would leap off of his burning cheeks.

"I'm not really sure what that means. But let's order the food at least. What do you want?"

"The-the tempura."

"Do you want udon or soba noodles with it? Or maybe the rice?"

"The-the udon."

"I'm going to order some fried pork and rice to go with it for later. Their pork cutlets are really thick. You'll like it."

Kobayakawa stood up and walked over to the telephone. Sawa was looking at his back as he made the call, when a thought struck him: what did Kobayakawa usually do for his meals? He felt strange.

Kobayakawa lived alone in this huge condo. His parents were in Tokyo. Sawa didn't know if he had any brothers or sisters. His guardian Iwatsuki was the only one who came to check up on him, which meant that he was probably always alone and always ate alone. Despite his huge dinner table, he never had to coordinate his dinner plans with anyone, as they were doing now. Kobayakawa just phoned some place and watched TV. Of course, he probably didn't stay at home all the time. But since downtown was full of kids and there was nowhere else to go for fun, he must have been alone a lot of the time.

"They said it would take about thirty minutes."

"Then could I use your phone? I'm going to call my parents."

"Go ahead. I'm going to go take a shower while you do that."

"What?" Sawa cried, his hand frozen on the phone receiver. He was reacting way too much.

Kobayakawa turned back around, the buttons of his shirt already undone, exposing his naked chest and

stomach to Sawa's view. "I'm sweaty and I feel gross. You can take a shower, too, if you want. I can lend you some of my clothes."

Watching Kobayakawa's stomach move as he spoke, catching the faint scent of his sweat, Sawa's nerves stretched taut. He felt as if normalcy was no longer normal. He couldn't understand what was happening in his mind.

"Uh, thanks. But I'm good for now." Sawa turned around quickly and put the phone to his ear.

"If you change your mind, just let me know."

Kobayakawa's laughing voice grew distant. It wasn't until he heard the sound of a door closing and the faint hiss of running water that he could relax.

"This is unbelievable." He pressed his hands against his head and crouched down beside the phone.

Sawa wasn't talking about Kobayakawa: he was talking about himself. He wanted to demand just what was going on here. He almost felt sorry for himself because Kobayakawa excited him so much, both his heart and his body.

He wasn't some girl all a-twitter with his first love. But this denial flooded his brain with fire. *First love. Love.*

A cold breeze chilled Sawa's spine, freezing him in place.

Who was in love with who? And why? No, it couldn't be that.

Sawa rejected the idea.

During his eighteen years of life, Sawa had had crushes on girls. But he'd been going to an all-

boys school since middle school, so he hadn't had opportunities to talk to girls, and he had never had a girlfriend. He still hadn't lost his virginity. But he had never taken that as a reason to fall in love with a boy instead. No way.

The feelings he had for Kobayakawa weren't love. It was sympathy, he decided, from one man to another. Or awe. Or fascination.

But then why was Kobayakawa always on his mind? Sawa squeezed his hands into fists.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

Sawa was momentarily lost about what to do. He ran to the front door and peered through the peephole, but he saw no one. He remembered that the condo was in a secured building. That meant there had to be an intercom somewhere to let Sawa talk to the outside, but he had no idea where to look for it.

He decided he had no other choice and reluctantly ran to the bathroom.

Running it over again and again in his mind, he stopped at the first door in the hall and opened it. He saw through a frosted glass door the faint figure of a person and heard the sound of water. He couldn't make out the details, but Sawa clapped his hand over his eyes immediately.

"Kobayakawa!" He knocked on the door, and the shower stopped.

"What's up?"

"I think the food's here. What should I do?"

"The intercom is on the wall between the kitchen and living room. You pick it up and then you can see

the guy on the screen and talk to him, to check who it is. Then push the button next to the phone to let him in."

"Got it. On the wall between the kitchen and the living room."

Sawa hurried back to the living room and found the intercom Kobayakawa had described.

"Hello? Delivery here."

He saw the delivery man on the screen. Sawa unlocked the door and watched the man walk inside.

"Sawa? Sawa!"

He heard Kobayakawa calling him from the bathroom. "What? I got the door open and ev—"

He started down the hallway, then stopped in his tracks. Kobayakawa was hanging out of the bathroom door, his wet hair stuck to his forehead and streams of water running down his body.

"Would you mind paying the guy while you're at it? My wallet's in my bag."

"Uh, okay. I've got some money, too."

He wanted to look away, but he couldn't. Kobayakawa's wet arms glistened enchantingly and Sawa realized that he was staring. At Kobayakawa's sinuous arms and legs, his taut stomach, and there—

"I'll cover it. You've been tutoring me, and all. But you have to pay the guy. I'll be out as soon as I dry off," Kobayakawa said, disappearing back into the bathroom.

Sawa still felt as if his brain had short-circuited. He stood rigid for a long moment, but when he heard the doorbell, he went back into the living room with stiff, robotic movements. He rummaged through Kobayakawa's bag looking for his wallet, then went to the front door.



"Hello! Here's your order: tempura with udon and fried pork, the variety plate, and fried eel with rice. That comes to four thousand five hundred yen."

Sawa opened the wallet and found several ten thousand yen bills inside. He gawked momentarily at how much was there, then somehow managed to hand one of them to the delivery person.

He took the food, provided with trays, into the living room. He set it down on the dinner table for the time being, set the wallet beside them, and waited for Kobayakawa to arrive.

"Sorry, I didn't think it'd get here so fast."

Kobayakawa wore a giant T-shirt and baggy pants. He had draped a towel over his wet hair. With his bangs hanging down in his face, he looked very young.

"It was four thousand five hundred yen. I put the change and your wallet over there."

"Thanks."

Kobayakawa put the wallet back into his bag without checking the contents. Every time he moved, the smell of the shampoo he'd used skimmed across Sawa's nostrils.

"Did you call your parents?"

"...I forgot."

"What were you thinking? If you don't call soon, your mom's going to be expecting you for dinner."

Paying no attention to Kobayakawa's ribbing, Sawa hurriedly dialed his home phone number. His mother picked up right away and they finished talking quickly. He'd forgotten to say that he might be spending the night, but in such a rushed conversation, he didn't

feel too guilty about it. For better or worse, Sawa's parents trusted him. He was sure it was because they had trusted his brother, too, and Sawa was following in his footsteps.

They removed the plastic wrap that served as a cover for the food, releasing the delicious smell of Kansai soup stock. The tempura had been put on a separate plate instead of inside the soup. When Sawa dipped a piece of tempura in the soup, its batter made a crisp snapping sound. It was freshly fried. The smell of the food had made Sawa suddenly hungrier, and he sucked up his noodles enthusiastically.

"Do you like it?"

"It's great. It's even better than I expected. This is amazing." The more noodles Sawa slurped up, the more he wanted to eat. The tempura went well with them.

"This is my favorite place. But I'd get tired of it if I ate there every day, so I never go more than once every other day." Kobayakawa had finished his first dish and was reaching for the second.

"You mean you don't have a girlfriend who can come cook for you?"

Kobayakawa denied it emphatically. "I already told you, I haven't gotten out much since I came here."

"Well, even if you don't have one here, I bet you had one in Tokyo," Sawa went on, not looking at Kobayakawa's face. The answer to that question didn't come as quickly.

"After everything you said, you still believe those rumors, too?"

"What?"

"About why I was kicked out of my last school. The rumor that I got a girl pregnant."

"No, I don't believe that."

"Why not? A guy like me is pretty popular in Tokyo."

Probably.

"I didn't even have to say anything. I'd just go to the clubs in Harajuku and around Hiroo, and the girls would come running."

This was the first time Sawa had heard Kobayakawa talk about his past.

"But I've been going places like that ever since I was a kid. I lost my virginity when I was in fifth grade."

"What?" The chopsticks in Sawa's fingers dropped from his hand. "You're kidding."

"No, it's true. My dad's place was always swarming with these young guys and their girlfriends, or the shop girls, or whoever. I didn't really get it at the time, but some lady with really heavy makeup came into the room I was sleeping in and she touched me."

Kobayakawa mimicked the movements of the woman's hand with his own so Sawa would understand. A shudder shot up Sawa's spine at the strangely obscene motions.

"Of course, it's not like I had no idea what was going on. But I didn't have any experience, so it surprised me. And I couldn't get away, so I just had to let it happen. I don't know if it felt good or not. I remember not wanting to move at all, and that lazy feeling just sweeping through my whole body."

Sawa couldn't have known what it was really like, but a scene floated through his mind, and he felt his body growing warm. This wasn't good dinner conversation.

"We did it—or I guess, she did it to me—a bunch more times, and after I started to like it, things went fast. When I was in sixth grade, I started getting off with the girls who came to our house by myself."

Heat flooded Sawa's entire body. Kobayakawa would have looked even younger than he did now, and he was picking up older women and having sex with them. His body maturing faster than his soul.

"I did it with some of the girlfriends of the guys who were working for my dad. There were a couple times I was pretty scared about what would happen if someone found out."

Kobayakawa sounded more thrilled than scared as he told his story.

"I did it a lot all the way until middle school, but I never laid a hand on the kids from school. And I used a rubber every time I did it. I'm not stupid enough to risk getting a girl pregnant."

"So..."

"The reason I got kicked out of my last school is because I punched this really annoying teacher."

Sawa's face tensed at the revelation of this truth.

"Iwatsuki picked that school without asking my opinion. All I did was take the tests. And it was full of rich, self-righteous kids. I tried to deal with it at first, but there were teachers who'd attack me for no reason. And then senior year, I took too much heat."

"What does that mean?"

"They would pick on the guys who weren't going to top schools, and there was this one guy they went out of their way to hassle. He was in my class. A nice guy. I guess he wasn't very strong, but I really liked him. He couldn't do anything right. People would insult him all the time and sometimes they would even kick him...never mind. I don't want to talk about it anymore." Kobayakawa brought the story to an abrupt end, but it was easy to imagine what happened next.

"Yeah." Sawa could find no other words. The meal continued in silence for a while after that, but Sawa couldn't enjoy the food. His heart was more full than his stomach. Kobayakawa soon noticed. He raised his eyebrows and gave Sawa a dubious look.

"Something wrong with your food? You're not eating anything."

"Yeah. I think I'm full."

"You don't like it?"

"I love it. I think I'm just not feeling well today."

"If you don't finish, I'm going to eat what's left."

Kobayakawa leaned across the table and pulled Sawa's hand toward him. While Sawa wondered what he was doing, Kobayakawa sucked the udon noodles he was holding off his chopsticks.

"Hey!"

"Hey, Sawa."

"What?"

Chewing heartily, Kobayakawa looked up at Sawa.

"Are you a virgin?"

"What—?" Sawa felt as if all the blood in his body was picking up speed. His heart was beating painfully fast.

"I thought so." Kobayakawa nodded solemnly.

"Thanks for being so sure about it."

"I thought your reaction to my story was kind of strange, and I was wondering if that was why. All the other guys are the same, aren't they?"

"How—how should I know?" He wasn't proud of it, but he had never even talked about that with Takaoka. Of course, people talked about their girlfriends and who they thought was hot every day. Sometimes they even started talking about sex. There must have been some people who had actually done it among all the ones talking, but he'd never been nosy enough to specifically ask about it.

"Hah. I bet you've never even masturbated."

"Hey—!"

"Why are you getting so upset? We're both boys. You're not embarrassed about it, are you?"

"You may not think it's embarrassing, but that doesn't mean everyone agrees."

"Really? You're not curious about how other people do it?"

Sawa felt something strange between his legs. He looked quickly under the table and spotted Kobayakawa's slipper on the floor. His foot was on top of Sawa's thigh.

"What are you—?"

"Man, you're hard. How long have you been holding it in?"

Sawa's temperature skyrocketed, boosted by Kobayakawa's questions.

"Cut it out." Sawa stood up suddenly and moved

into the living room.

"What, in the middle of our conversation?"

"We're done talking. I'm going home."

As Sawa stuffed his notes and textbooks back into his bag, a bundle of nerves in Sawa's spine tingled. Kobayakawa had gotten up to follow him and was standing right behind Sawa, staring down at him.

"You're not going to help me study?"

"I taught you the basics. You can do the rest yourself."

"If you leave, I'm not going to take the test tomorrow."

"What—?"

Sawa turned around, feeling trapped. He was met by Kobayakawa's grinning face, crouching beside him. "Has anyone ever told you how gullible you are, Sawa?"

People told him that constantly.

"Especially with me."

Sawa knew that was true.

"But why are you going to so much extra trouble for me? Because Suzushima asked you to?"

Sawa didn't have a clear answer to such a straightforward question. He hesitated, then threw back the word Kobayakawa had used against him. "Because I'm gullible."

"Well, if you're so gullible, why not stay a little longer?"

Kobayakawa's voice was even, but deep inside the eyes that looked at Sawa, he could feel tiny flames roaring.

Kobayakawa grabbed Sawa's hand and pushed it onto Sawa's groin.

"Kobayakawa—"

"Show me how you do it. If you've actually done it before."

A small smile crossed his lips. His hard words tickled at Sawa's ears as his head drooped.

"What are you—?"

"I want to know how people do it. So I told you, if you're so gullible, you can teach me."

Kobayakawa's voice was getting harsher. Sawa had tried to resist with his other hand, but Kobayakawa already held it securely. He moved Sawa's hand between his legs and deftly pulled down the zipper with the tips of his fingers.

"N—no! Stop!"

"Stop screaming like a woman."

His insult silenced Sawa.

Sawa's fingers reached through the gap in his underwear, but someone else's fingers were beside them.

"Ah—"

"I only touched you a little bit and you're hard. You'd never be able to have sex with a girl." Grinning, Kobayakawa got even braver. He wasn't satisfied simply tracing his fingertips over Sawa; he wrapped his hand around him.

"Kobayakawa—"

"Don't fight it. Try holding it like you do when you're alone."

Kobayakawa's hands took both of Sawa's and

moved them over Sawa's member, bending his fingers one by one around it.

As Kobayakawa's warnings grew stronger, Sawa's penis pulsed and grew harder, just as Kobayakawa wanted.

"It's beautiful, Sawa."

"Don't stare at it!"

Sawa raised his knees and tried to hide from Kobayakawa's gaze, but he wasn't very successful. Instead, Kobayakawa used his own legs to deftly push apart Sawa's own.

"I already saw it when we were standing next to each other in the bathroom. Do you want to see mine?"

"What—?" Blood seared the skin of Sawa's face. His entire body burned with humiliation at these unbelievable events.

"Don't be embarrassed."

Kobayakawa lifted one of his hands from Sawa's body and pulled his pants off expertly along with his underwear, exposing his member.

"Kobayakawa, stop it! Get dressed! What are you doing?"

"Why are you so embarrassed? You're acting so grossed out, I bet you want it bad." Kobayakawa came closer to Sawa, looking straight at him as he pulled on himself. He reached out again for Sawa's hand and made him touch it. Sawa winced.

"See? It's the same."

Kobayakawa chuckled deep in his throat, moving his hips slightly.

Sawa slid through his hands, Kobayakawa's

overlaying his own, and felt his passion rising in him.

"Nngh."

From the twitching leaps of the quivering tip, a thick fluid welled up and spilled over both their hands. Sawa's shame only grew when he saw how much had come out.

"You look good. And your—skin is all red. I want to hear you—scream like a woman."

"What—" Sawa squeezed his eyes shut, but it was no good. His groin ached fiercely, straining with an entirely different feeling than when he did it himself.

"Ah—!" A whispered cry escaped Kobayakawa, just beside him. "Seeing you like that—you make me want to go all the way, even if you are a man."

"N—no, leave me alone—!"

Sawa's voice sounded disturbingly lustful in its resistance.

"When you talk like that, it makes me want to come."

Kobayakawa's voice was cut by rough panting and the movement of his hands became erratic. His fingers moved over Sawa, skillfully improvising, alternately squeezing him and releasing him. His knees were spread wide, trembling, and his hips seemed to move on their own.

"Nngh!"

It excited Sawa to be touched by someone else, and to be forced to hold someone else's penis.

The part of Kobayakawa that Sawa held in his hands—its shape, its heat—was very different from Sawa's.

It twitched ever faster and he could see it getting harder.

"No...wh—why?" Sawa felt the core of his being growing numb, confronted by this unimaginable situation.

"Don't hold so hard—yeah. Pull it more by yourself. It'll feel better and I'll get harder. You can feel it twitching, can't you?"

"No—"

Stop it! That was all he wanted to say, but try as he might to speak, the words caught in his throat. His groin was acting against his will, aching in its selfish pursuit of pleasure.

"Sawa..."

The moment he heard his name, like teeth on his earlobe, a violent impact flared deep inside his hips. And when Kobayakawa flicked his fingers over Sawa's tip, he took it as a signal, the marauding heat inside him shooting out of his body instantaneously.

"Ah—nngh!"

He tried to rise above the passion, but it was impossible. Sawa's hands as well as Kobayakawa's were soaked.

"I—I can't hold it either—"

"Go ahead. You can come."

As if won over by this, Kobayakawa's member trembled and his passion spilled forth.

"Mm!"

Kobayakawa gasped as he tried to bite back any noise, his breath brushing over Sawa's cheek. Seeing the thick, glistening fluid, the passion Sawa thought he had

already spent seemed to rise again.

"Sawa?" Kobayakawa's hands still lingered on Sawa's organ; he must have sensed Sawa's reaction. Kobayakawa looked at him in confusion, but an instant later Sawa had regained control of his reason.

"Why did you do this?" Sawa glared at Kobayakawa. A powerful humiliation was rising in him alongside a sense of wretchedness.

"Sawa..."

"Do you enjoy tormenting people?"

Kobayakawa reached out to him, but Sawa knocked his hand away. He hurried to wipe his hands and legs clean with a tissue that was nearby. He couldn't get rid of the stickiness, but it didn't matter. He wanted to get away from here as soon as he could.

Sawa straightened his disheveled clothing with trembling hands and threw his bag over his shoulder. But all the strength drained from his knees when he tried to stand.

"Are you okay...?"

Kobayakawa helped him up. Heat rose in Sawa's body as he caught the scent of Kobayakawa's shampoo. Disgusted at himself, Sawa shoved Kobayakawa away from him roughly. "Don't touch me!"

"Sawa, why are you so angry?" Kobayakawa was looking at him with a perplexed expression.

Maybe for him, this kind of thing didn't mean anything. Maybe it was just the natural extension of having fun together. But it wasn't like that for Sawa. His body ached, and his mind was in such chaos that he couldn't think.

This wasn't him. It couldn't be. If he didn't focus and reject this, he wouldn't be able to stand tall.

"If you don't know why, I'm not going to explain."

"Sawa, hold on. Sawa!"

Sawa ran from the room and Kobayakawa chased after him. Sawa ran into the hall frantically, but he didn't even have time enough to pull his shoes on. He ran outside of the apartment carrying his shoes in his hand.

"Sawa! Wait!"

Kobayakawa opened the front door that Sawa had just slammed shut and peered out into the hallway. Sawa threw one of his shoes back at him.

"Hey! Watch it!"

He saw Kobayakawa turn and run as he got into the elevator.

In the gap of the closing door, he saw Kobayakawa's face as he came running. He felt like he had to get away from his eyes. Sawa squeezed his eyes shut.

He gave himself over to the feeling of lightness produced by the elevator's fall.

When he reached the first floor and the doors opened, he held himself ready, but Kobayakawa wasn't there. As soon as he took his first step outside, he realized that he wasn't wearing shoes. He hurried to put on the shoes he was carrying, but there was only one in his hand.

"What am I doing?" he murmured, feeling hollow. Kobayakawa had affected him. Kobayakawa had done him, and Sawa had liked it.

Sawa desperately fought back the tears that welled

up in his eyes and ran from the building's entrance.

Chapter Five

A few days after the exams had ended, Sawa saw his results and let out a deep sigh.

The paper he'd gotten back showed his scores for all of the tests. But they were all terrible.

Somehow he'd managed to pull off the average score but, remembering the grade requirements for the schools he wanted to get into, he knew it wasn't good enough. He feared the parent-teacher conference that would come from this. But before that, Sawa had to see Suzushima in his office. Sawa had a good idea of what he was going to say to him.

"Ah, Sawa. Have a seat."

Not even the slightest breeze came in through the open window. The two were sweating just sitting in their chairs. In the sweltering heat, the noise of the cicadas in the trees next to the school grated on Sawa's nerves.

"Were things difficult for you this semester?" Suzushima didn't waste any time.

"No...."

"You understand the position you're in, right?"

"I know."

"These grades are going to make it very difficult to get a recommendation for the schools you selected."

"I know." Sawa had nothing to say for himself except these brief answers and silence. He bowed his

head and stood up. As he walked to the door, Suzushima called out to him.

"Just to let you know, Kobayakawa got good grades. I asked him how he did it. Do you know what he told me?"

Sawa stiffened at the mention of Kobayakawa's name. "I don't know."

"He said that there was someone who was willing to risk everything for him, and so Kobayakawa studied hard for that person."

Kobayakawa's words, delivered by Suzushima's voice, pierced Sawa's body. But he said nothing and only bowed his head.

The day after he'd fled from Kobayakawa's house was the first day of the exams. Their seating arrangement had been changed from the ordinary one to follow their student numbers, so Kobayakawa, who had just transferred in, was sitting far away from Sawa. But when Kobayakawa got to school, the first thing he'd done was come stand in front of Sawa's desk. He'd set a bag down on his desk, then gone to his own seat.

Conscious of the eyes of everyone in the room, Sawa looked inside the bag and found the shoe he had thrown at Kobayakawa the night before.

For the next four days of the exams and the three days after that—a week all together—Sawa hadn't exchanged a single word with Kobayakawa.

No matter what he was doing, thoughts of Kobayakawa filled Sawa and the slightest provocation brought back the memory of that night.

Sawa wasn't a puritanical person and he didn't

believe in self-denial. He was just a late bloomer, if anything, since he had never sought out information about sex. He had masturbated before, but it was usually unwilling, driven by necessity. He was never motivated to do it and he didn't read porn novels or slobber over photos of female celebrities.

So the things Kobayakawa had done and the pleasure he had brought Sawa with his stranger's hands was too much for him. Sometimes when he thought about it, he would reach for his groin and masturbate, trying to recapture the feeling. But he would come back to his senses as soon as it was over and be oppressed by violent self-loathing.

Why was Sawa behaving like this? Why hadn't he punched Kobayakawa when he was doing those things to him? Why did he get excited? Sawa tortured himself with these questions, but never found an answer.

It was something he had wondered about ever since he first met Kobayakawa. Kobayakawa was a man unlike any Sawa had ever met before. He usually acted so adult that it was hard to imagine they were the same age, but something about him still seemed childlike. Kobayakawa's expression at dinner was burned into Sawa's memory.

He wanted to find out more about what Kobayakawa thought about his life. Wasn't he sad eating all by himself? Wasn't he sad living all alone?

Since Sawa was ignoring him, Kobayakawa would sit at his own desk and stare resolutely out the window. Of course, Sawa was in his line of sight, but he refused to look at Kobayakawa. There was a complicated vibe

between the two of them.

Sometimes Takaoka, knowing no fear, would try to talk to them, but when he got only cold looks, he would slink away dejectedly. Sawa felt bad, but there was nothing he could do about it. They were growing apart.

Sawa's heart ached when saw Kobayakawa's expressionless face. If they were cast into summer and it was still like this, what would happen to them? Sawa wondered, but wonder was all he did. He never lifted a finger to change anything.

"Okay, we're going to decide the events for the ball game exposition now."

Anticipating the end of semester ceremonies on Friday, Sawa stood in front of the blackboard at the beginning of the week. The class secretary had written down all the events on the board: basketball, volleyball, soccer, softball, handball, ping-pong, and tennis.

Perhaps because their school had none of the strictness typical of an elevator school, even the people in the sports clubs had relatively good grades. Club participation wasn't compulsory, but until junior year, the membership rate was nearly seventy percent. But once the senior year exposition was over, a lot of people withdrew.

Sawa had never belonged to a club. He envied the people who could dedicate themselves to something like that.

"We're going to try and respect people's preferences for games, so can I get you to raise your

hands for the event you want to participate in? First up: basketball."

Sawa read off the events, the most popular being basketball and volleyball. On the opposite end of the spectrum was ping-pong. Those who lost rock-paper-scissors competitions were forced to change events. Once Sawa had recorded everything, all eyes slowly turned to the back of the room.

"Don't you want to play anything, Kobayakawa?"

"No," he replied without hesitation.

"Isn't there someone else who didn't raise their hand?"

"Did you forget to count yourself, Sawa?"

Suzushima had been watching him the entire time in silence. When he pointed this out, Sawa gasped. "Oh no! I was so caught up in making everything go smoothly, I completely forgot to vote."

The class bubbled with laughter.

"Get your head out of the clouds."

"But this is awful! I wanted to be in basketball."

"But you can't. They just finished settling it with rock-paper-scissors," a student in the front row pointed out.

"So I have to do...ping-pong?"

"If we put you and Kobayakawa together, everything works out." Suzushima wrote their names on the board. "That's done, then. You can go home, everyone." With a clattering of chairs, it was decided.

"The exposition starts tomorrow morning, so don't forget to bring your workout clothes and to pack a lunch."

"All right. See you tomorrow."

The people prepared their things and started to leave the room.

"How did this happen?" Sawa still couldn't accept the reality of it, staring at the blackboard in shock.

"You must have had your mind on something else." Takaoka was standing behind him, his backpack slung over his shoulder.

"But I didn't. Man, I haven't played ping-pong since elementary school."

"How about you, Kobayakawa? Are you any good?" Takaoka asked in his characteristically loud voice, turning to look at Kobayakawa, who was still sitting at the back of the classroom. Sawa's eyes, drawn back along with his, met Kobayakawa's. But Kobayakawa looked away at once.

"Whatever."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not doing it." Standing up from his desk, Kobayakawa casually threw his bag over his shoulder and left the room. Sawa interpreted Kobayakawa turning his broad back on them as his final rejection.

Once the exposition was over, they would go straight into the closing ceremonies, and then summer break would start. And he wouldn't be able to see Kobayakawa again until the next semester started.

"That jerk...." Sawa grabbed his bag and ran into the hall before he'd even finished speaking.

"Hey, Sawa!" Takaoka shouted. But Sawa didn't have time for him. He had to find Kobayakawa, who had left so abruptly. Sawa ran desperately. He leapt down

the stairs and finally caught up to Kobayakawa, who was changing his shoes at the entrance.

"Kobayakawa!" Sawa shouted his name and Kobayakawa stopped. Sawa had used up almost all his energy to get there and doubled over, his hands on his knees, breathing raggedly.

"God...I told you to wait. But...you didn't even slow down, did you?" He wanted to talk to him, but he was panting so hard it made it hard to speak. Sweat was starting to trickle down his body. He was shocked by his lack of endurance. Still, he finally managed to say what he wanted to say. "It may not count for attendance, but you can't just say you're not going. You have to be at the exposition."

Kobayakawa stood silently, staring down at Sawa with his bag tucked under his arm. His lips were pressed tightly shut, his shapely eyebrows knit.

"Don't just stand there. Say something." Sawa's heartbeat was slowly returning to normal. Sawa straightened and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Do you want me to participate?"

"Huh? What does that have—"

"You don't want to do it with me, do you?" Kobayakawa's next words left Sawa speechless. "You don't want to have to be on a team with a guy like me, do you?" he repeated, his expression never changing.

"When did I say I didn't want to?"

"You never said it in words. But you've been ignoring me for a long time."

"That—that's different."

Heat flared into Sawa's cheeks.

"Is it because of what I did to you the day before the exams?" Kobayakawa spit out, seeing Sawa's reaction, and lowered his head. Maybe because his shoulders were hunched, Kobayakawa wasn't giving off any of the arrogance that he usually radiated. "After you went home, I was all alone and I started thinking. About why I did that to you and about why you left."

His voice was different from usual, too. It was subdued.

"I only meant it as a joke at first. When you were listening to my story about my first time, your face turned red, then you got real pale, and I thought it was funny. It's something I picked up from talking to the guys at my dad's place. But—" Kobayakawa cut himself off. "But when I saw you turn all red, I don't know why, but it made me serious about it."

Sawa's spine trembled at the suffering in his voice. "What do you mean, 'serious'?"

Kobayakawa looked up slowly at Sawa's question. His eyes were completely different from usual. They looked utterly powerless. "I was really happy that you were so willing to help me. I've never met anyone like you before."

Kobayakawa was feeling the same thing as Sawa.

"Everyone sees my dad's face on top of mine and hardly anyone ever talks to me for me. I don't really mind that. I'm probably going to be like my dad when I get old enough, anyway. I'm used to the way things work there. But you...that thing you shouted at everyone. I can't express it very well, but it really touched me. In here."

Kobayakawa touched his chest. No, not there: his heart.

"Don't make judgments about people based on rumors and speculation before you even meet them. And you said something nice to me in the nurse's office—that as long as I wore this school's uniform, I would belong here. It made me feel like I wasn't just the son of the Koryu Alliance's leader, but Uzuki Kobayakawa, the person."

Kobayakawa was revealing things that he'd kept locked away in his heart. He accepted his environment, but by hiding the darkness of it away somewhere in his heart. Sawa's words had shone a light on that darkness without ever intending to. Sawa didn't know what he could say to that. He simply stood in front of Kobayakawa.

Looking directly into Sawa's face, Kobayakawa slowly opened his mouth.

"You're probably not going to like this, but—I like you."

Sawa's heart squeezed tight at his confession.

"When I forced you to do that, it was because I—I wanted to see you come." Kobayakawa squeezed tight the hand pressed against his chest. "But I didn't think about how you would feel and let myself get carried away. I totally understand why you were ignoring me. I figured that if I were you, I wouldn't want to be on a team with a horrible guy like me, even for school. So I wasn't going to participate."

Kobayakawa's expression changed. Strength came back into his eyes and he fixed them on Sawa. "I want to

know how you feel.”

Kobayakawa took a single step toward him.

“I want to know why you were bothering so much with me.”

“Be—because Mister Suzushima asked me to.”

“I don’t think he told you to help me with my exams.”

Sawa jerked his head up in surprise. When Suzushima had called him in to talk about his exams, he said he’d talked to Kobayakawa. Sawa had no way of knowing what the conversation between the two of them had been like, but Kobayakawa had probably already known about the first deal between Suzushima and Sawa.

“So maybe he didn’t ask me to do it, but I’m the class representative. I have an obligation to make you fit into the class.”

“Is that why?” Kobayakawa came even closer, turning Sawa’s words back on him. “You went to so much trouble for me because you’re the class representative? And that’s why you helped me with the exams? Even though I did that to you?”

“But that—that’s not—”

“What is it then?”

Kobayakawa’s eyes bored into Sawa from his greater height, squeezing Sawa’s heart in their powerful grip, refusing to let him off the hook. The hand he held in his own was burning hot, Kobayakawa’s warmth traveling through his entire body.

“Kobayakawa—” The smell of tobacco stalled Sawa’s thoughts.

“I just want to know how you feel,” Kobayakawa said in a low voice. “Why do you bother with me? I can’t understand it. Cut me loose if that’s what you want, before I get the wrong idea.”

He raised Sawa’s hand to his mouth and gently brought it to his lips. Kobayakawa’s eyelids were lowered as he did it, clouding Sawa’s vision with the effusive charm of his expression. The instant that the tips of his fingers grazed Kobayakawa’s lips, a shock like an electric current shot through Sawa’s body.

“I like you—” Kobayakawa’s lips touched him again. “I really like you.”

Again, they touched. Not only Sawa’s fingers, but all the way to his heart. Sawa’s mind convulsed under the ardent sensation.

He had wondered for so long about his feelings for Kobayakawa. He had held doubts that reached no conclusions. This hazy cobweb of feelings in the deepest part of his heart couldn’t be explained away by pretending that they were just friends.

Sawa had always rejected the idea. He’d decided in his mind that it couldn’t be that. But apparently the barrier that Sawa had run up against didn’t exist inside Kobayakawa, since he had so easily overcome it to arrive here, now, before his eyes.

“Kobayakawa—”

Maybe it would be okay. Maybe Sawa could overcome that barrier, too. Maybe he could allow himself to feel that way.

On the day before the exams, the worst part for him wasn’t the fact that he’d been touched. It was that he

was being toyed with as part of some meaningless joke devoid of emotions. He'd hated himself for climaxing so quickly at Kobayakawa's touch, but now he understood why he had.

It was impossible not to get excited by the touch of someone he liked so much. It was impossible not to get excited by the naked body of someone he liked so much.

"How do you feel about me, Sawa?" At some point, Kobayakawa had wrapped his hands around both of Sawa's. Held so tenderly, the warmth of these emotions began to spill into his heart. Sawa believed he could follow them.

"I—"

"You like me?" Kobayakawa cut him off before he could finish.

"How can you interrupt someone when they're saying something so important?" The embarrassment Sawa had been struggling to contain burst out of him. They were standing in the front doors of the school. There was no telling when someone would come by. They were standing in plain view, facing each other and holding hands. And Kobayakawa kept kissing his hands over and over.

"Am I wrong?"

"Oh, for crying out loud! Let me go!"

"No." Kobayakawa refused eagerly. "I'm not going to let you go until you say once and for all how you feel about me."

"Oh my god." Sawa was losing control. "Doesn't it count that I tried to say it before you cut me off?"

"So you were going to say that you like me?" Kobayakawa squeezed both of Sawa's hands tightly and pulled him closer. At the sight of Kobayakawa's face right in front of him, Sawa's heart began to pound.

"What—"

"I want to hear you say it. Please say it! Tell me that you like me!"

His eyes burned, gazing at Sawa. They seemed to see into the depths of his heart, jolting it, and Sawa almost felt like he could say it.

But he fought back from the temptation and shook his head.

"I can't do that in a place like this," he said, dropping his head, but not allowing any argument.

"Where, then?"

"Somewhere we can be alone," Sawa said in an almost imperceptible voice, announcing his feelings.

Sawa couldn't reason it away: he was in love with Kobayakawa. He was obsessed with him. He'd gotten excited by his touch. He had tried to come up with some other reason for that, but it was pointless.

And it wasn't as if his reaction had been purely physical. When a man is touched, he gets excited. But he hadn't disliked it. He wanted to be touched more. And that could be nothing other than love.

The two were silent until they reached Kobayakawa's apartment, but they held hands the entire time. Of course Sawa had resisted, since he was so conscious of other people's stares, so it wasn't as if their

hands had been locked together tightly. They'd held hands instead by just barely touching their index fingers, something that even middle school couples would have found childish.

But once they were through the building's entrance and inside the elevator, Kobayakawa apparently reached his limit. Sawa thought he was going to take his hand, but the next instant he felt like he was floating through space as Kobayakawa swept him up in his arms. He pressed his lips against Sawa's madly, as if he were enveloping him. Caught up in the rapid-fire kisses, Sawa couldn't even breathe. He'd missed his chance to resist.

He had kissed people before, as a kind of extension of a greeting. He had even done it once with a boy, on a dare. But this was the first time he'd had such an intense, persistent kiss, and he didn't know how he should do it.

Kobayakawa's tongue was crawling around inside his mouth like a wet, living thing, licking every corner of his mouth, behind his teeth and the roof of his mouth, stimulating everything. When it encountered Sawa's tongue, Kobayakawa didn't show even the slightest hesitation as he caressed the edge of it, then intertwined his own tongue with it.

Not allowed to pull away, Sawa was forced to learn the tricks for experiencing Kobayakawa's tongue, reading the changing dynamics.

His jaw was getting tired, and just when his difficulty in breathing reached its peak, the elevator doors slowly opened. In the space of a moment when Sawa almost could have felt relief, Kobayakawa didn't even move to get off the elevator, let alone release him.



He was really serious about this.

Sawa tapped Kobayakawa on the back desperately, trying to bring him back to his senses.

"What?"

Kobayakawa pulled his lips away for a moment. Though slightly fearful of his anger, Sawa pressed on.

"We're here." Sawa used all of his strength to push Kobayakawa away from him and stepped off the elevator just ahead of him.

But Kobayakawa seized his arm again immediately. It was as if he didn't want to be apart from Sawa for even a moment. Seeing Kobayakawa's desperation, Sawa decided to go easy on him.

He let Kobayakawa pull him back into his arms. His embarrassment and shame had not yet disappeared, but his desire to be engulfed in Kobayakawa's warmth was stronger. Wrapped in each other's arms, the two opened the door together and took off their shoes, then pressed their lips together once more.

"Sawa...Sawa...."

This kiss consumed him, even more than the kiss in the elevator. Kobayakawa pulled so hard on his mouth that Sawa was sure his heart was going to be sucked out of his body.

Sawa's childish kisses were quickly transforming into the mature kisses of an adult. With only the captivating touch of Kobayakawa's skillful lips, passion budded inside Sawa. His body began to tremble from the inside out with tension and anticipation.

Kobayakawa's hips pressed so close against him that as they began to move and their clothes rubbed

against each other, that part of him that was so honest began, little by little, to react.

He pulled his hips away, not wanting Kobayakawa to feel it, but Kobayakawa's hips followed him.

"Nngh."

His quiet groan of resistance made Kobayakawa laugh happily. He knew that Sawa was trying to get away from him, but he laughed anyway.

Sawa grunted. He was a petty man. Annoyed, Sawa pushed against his chest, but Kobayakawa's body didn't budge an inch. Instead, he pressed his lips that much harder against Sawa's, and it became even more difficult for him to breathe.

As the weight against him slowly increased, Sawa's back arched backwards. In his slightly wider field of vision, he could see the ceiling of the hallway. Just as he was sure that he was about to fall, his body was swept into the air.

"Kobayakawa?"

"Change of scenery."

Sawa thought he might release his lips, but no. Kobayakawa carried Sawa in his arms, walking in the opposite direction of the living room.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't want your first time to be in the hallway, do you?" Kobayakawa asked in all seriousness. Sawa was about to ask "First time for what?" when the question reached his brain and he realized what Kobayakawa was talking about.

"No." He shook his head, and Kobayakawa laughed.

"Me either. So we're changing location."

He trotted up to the door to his room and, when he opened it, the first thing Sawa caught sight of was the huge bed.

Kobayakawa dropped him on top of it. Then, without a word, Kobayakawa began unbuttoning his shirt and, once he'd finished, pulled his pants off, throwing them roughly to the ground. He rested a foot on the edge of the bed, and the springs creaked loudly.

"Kobayakawa—"

Sawa was immobile under Kobayakawa's intense gaze.

"Sawa, will you tell me your first name?"

"My name?"

"Who else's name would I be asking for at a time like this?" Kobayakawa responded in annoyance to Sawa's hasty question.

"I—I'm sor—"

"Sorry. I guess I'm just impatient."

Kobayakawa put a hand to his forehead, seeing the fright on Sawa's face. He turned around and sat down. The two were pretending to be calm, but just below was a fierce, roiling desire. It came over both of them, this passion on the verge of release.

"Kobayakawa—"

Sawa sat up slowly, gazing at Kobayakawa's hunched-over back. He fought back his embarrassment and took off the shirt he was wearing.

"Kobayakawa."

"What?" he replied without turning around.

"How much should I take off?" Sawa's voice

shook as he asked the question.

"Sawa—?" Kobayakawa turned around to look at him

"My first name is Junya," Sawa answered with a bashful smile. "And yours is Uzuki, right?"

"Yeah."

Kobayakawa reached out for Sawa's unbuttoned shirt. Following his hands, Sawa took off his shirt. And as he undid the belt of his pants, Kobayakawa turned around once more and kneeled on the bed. "Are you sure?"

His toned chest, his taut stomach. Sawa had none of those things.

"What would you do if I said no?"

"I'd accept that."

"Do you think you could?" Sawa laughed wickedly, and Kobayakawa tweaked his nose grumpily.

"You're not being very nice."

"I'm being very nice!" Sawa laughed and obediently accepted Kobayakawa's kiss. "No way I could ask you to do that at a time like this."

"Sa—Junya..."

To be honest, Sawa's nervousness was near its peak, and he wanted nothing more than to run away as soon as possible. But this was not the sort of situation where he could expect someone to come along and reassure him or guide him.

This was the result he'd been hoping for. But Sawa had been born in an ordinary family and lived his life in an ordinary way. In the life that Junya Sawa lived, buried up to his neck in "normality," this would be the

first "abnormal" thing to happen to him. Even though he had never had sex with a woman, he was about to have it with a man.

But, he thought. Even if I was born a man, that doesn't change the things that make me love a person.

Sawa had never been in love with a woman, so he couldn't come up with any smooth lines. But the way Sawa felt for Kobayakawa was genuine, and the feelings Kobayakawa had for him weren't fake, either. They both desired each other with all their hearts, shyly closing the distance between them. Each pursuing the other's affections, they had at last reached this point.

"Let's kiss, Uzuki."

Sawa rested his hands on Kobayakawa's shoulders and brought his lips toward him. After only a light kiss, he pulled back and Kobayakawa's tongue flicked out to lick Sawa's lips. He began to slowly push Sawa back until he fell on his back.

"Uzuki—"

"I like you, Junya," Kobayakawa murmured and moved his lips to Sawa's jaw, trailed them down his neck, and moved to his chest. The nibbles on his collarbone brought forth a quiet, lustful cry.

"Did it hurt?" Kobayakawa was acutely sensitive to Sawa's reactions.

"No, it just tickled a little." He was going to be brave. "Really."

Relief visible on his face, Kobayakawa lowered his head once more over Sawa's chest.

Sawa grew embarrassed at the wet sound of Kobayakawa's tongue against his body. He remembered

that when he had chased Kobayakawa, he had run so hard that his body had been covered by a film of sweat. He was sure Kobayakawa didn't mind, and it was too late to say that he wanted to take a bath anyway.

Kobayakawa's hand finally moved to Sawa's chest, his fingers swirling over it elaborately. A caress spun away from the skin; the spin became a pinch. Kobayakawa stroked Sawa's chest delicately with the flat of his fingers and his nails, awakening a strange sensation in Sawa.

Overriding the ticklish feeling was a growing eagerness. The streams of blood flowing just beneath his skin seemed ready to boil.

"Nngh—"

"Are you getting excited?" Kobayakawa wanted to understand the noise Sawa made, his fingers searching out Sawa's nipples at the same time. Sawa couldn't tear his eyes away from the slight movements of Kobayakawa's tongue.

"I—I don't really know..."

"But?"

"It tickles."

"It tickles, huh?" Kobayakawa gazed at Sawa indulgently, pleased by his honesty.

"So what does this feel like?"

"Ack!"

Sawa was half-dressed, still wearing his pants, so when Kobayakawa suddenly trailed his fingers from Sawa's waist over his crotch, Sawa shouted in embarrassment.

"I bet it's easier to understand how that feels. And

you already have a little experience with that.”

Kobayakawa's hands moved quickly down from Sawa's chest, skillfully removing his belt and unzipping his pants. Bending Sawa's knees, he yanked his pants off.

Sawa had closed his eyes during this to block out his intense shame. He still had his underwear on when Kobayakawa's warmth faded from his skin. He wondered why, but supposed he had stood up to pull off his own pants.

When Sawa opened his eyes, they were drawn irresistibly to Kobayakawa's long, slender legs; to his shapely buttocks: his entire, well-proportioned body.

“What are you staring at?” Kobayakawa demanded.

“I was thinking how beautiful you are,” Sawa replied honestly. Kobayakawa's breath caught for a moment, as if that had surprised him.

“You're the one who's beautiful, Junya,” he replied with an intense expression.

“What's so beautiful about me?”

“Everything,” Kobayakawa declared with firm assurance.

“Uzuki...”

“I'm so nervous. I get so excited when I realize that this is the first time I've ever touched such a beautiful body.”

His large hands moved slowly from Sawa's shoulders to his legs. His lips trailed behind, following the path of his hands. Sawa's skin grew warmer even at these light kisses. Kobayakawa passed over his stomach

and gently pushed opened his closed legs, removing the final bit of cloth that covered him.

“Ah—no!”

“Don't be embarrassed.”

Sawa had moved his hands to hide himself, but Kobayakawa held them aside, gazing seriously down at the part of him that was already starting to get erect. The feeling of his eyes on him excited Sawa and a pain twitched through him.

“You're beautiful,” Kobayakawa confessed in a passionate exhalation of breath. “It's so beautiful. I know I said that before, but it makes me nervous to even touch it.”

His fingertips brushed against it, and a slippery sensation yanked Sawa's entire body forward in reaction.

“Ah!”

“I can't do it if you sit up.”

Sawa reached out a hand, and Kobayakawa pushed it back against his chest. Kobayakawa cradled Sawa's member in his other hand, licking the tip of it with his tongue, as if cleaning it.

“Oh, wow...”

Kobayakawa had done the same thing the day before the exam. But Sawa had barely been able to understand what was going on then; he hadn't had the luxury of watching every movement of Kobayakawa's tongue like he could now.

“Does that feel good?”

Kobayakawa looked up at Sawa, curious about the reaction in Sawa's voice and penis. The vivid sight of his

wet lips and pink tongue inflamed Sawa.

"Uzuki—" Unable to bear the sight any longer, Sawa covered his face with his hands and shook his head from side to side.

"Don't close your eyes." Kobayakawa's powerful voice pulled Sawa back.

"But Uzuki—"

"You should always pay close attention to what other people are doing to you."

He spoke in a peremptory tone, bringing Sawa under his sway, and returned to his loving work. His tongue moved elaborately and, from time to time, he glanced up at Sawa.

Once he'd stimulated the tip, he took it into his mouth and started gently sucking on it. Sawa was overwhelmed. An intense feeling unlike anything he'd accomplished by himself or even felt the last time spread through his body. He didn't know very well what this should look like. But he followed the movements of Kobayakawa's tongue with his eyes, burning a realistic afterimage into his mind.

As Kobayakawa licked devotedly from the tip to the very bottom, he began to use his hand, as well. He gave himself free rein, until everything was wet and sticky, even the place behind it, and inside.

"Mm—"

Sawa trembled with desire, begging submissively for more pleasure. His body had never known satisfaction as rich as this before, and it expressed itself in a welling pool of sweet fluid. He couldn't have held it back even if he tried. A steady transformation began inside him until

he felt like he was becoming something else.

"You're quick," Kobayakawa smiled teasingly when he noticed. His words gave Sawa new strength to contain himself, but it wasn't something he could consciously control.

"But—"

"But what?" Kobayakawa asked encouragingly as he eagerly licked up the liquid dripping from Sawa. Sawa saw none of the strength that pierced his soul in Kobayakawa's face, only a passion that threatened to reduce him to jelly.

"When you touch me—"

"I know. When I touch you, you get excited." Kobayakawa nodded, looking pleased by Sawa's explanation. He sucked on him with renewed force, as if to reward him.

"Ah!" Pleasure swelled against the top of Sawa's skull, desire exploding inside him. "Uzu—ki! Ahh!"

A climax shot through him, and his body cast off all its strength. But even ejaculating wasn't enough—what remained began to bubble again into a fresh pleasure budding inside his body. Sawa convulsed, assaulted by this sensation in every extremity. His lips delivered the violent gasps of his heaving chest. Kobayakawa's smile pressed gently against them.

"Junya."

"Nngh—mm!"

He reacted desperately to the precious kiss, begging for more. He transformed the light contact of the kiss to something much deeper.

This kiss was no simple greeting: it excited them

both. Sawa used his tongue without restraint, darting into Kobayakawa's mouth, across the roof of his mouth, his tongue, and everywhere else. His mouth was rich with responsiveness.

He would remember that sensation even while eating, and his body would tingle. He discovered through this kiss the immense pleasure a small child feels by putting things into its mouth.

"Nngh. Mmph!"

Saliva flowed from Kobayakawa's mouth into Sawa's. He gulped the sweet, wet warmth of it, his throat leaping, as Kobayakawa plunged his tongue into the opening space. Sawa grunted at the strain, so bad that he could barely breathe.

"Nn—ah!"

Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes, and his body stiffened. When his stomach tensed with the strain of not breathing, Kobayakawa's tongue pulled away, and oxygen came flooding into him. Sawa understood then that even the act of breathing could be made pleasurable.

"Junya..." Kobayakawa stroked his forehead and urged him onward, and Sawa kissed him.

As Kobayakawa lowered his weight onto him, Sawa had a new experience of his body. Kobayakawa was still wearing his underwear. But even through the fabric Sawa knew that his member was rigidly erect and ready. Kobayakawa rubbed it against Sawa's unrestrained penis, which met him eagerly.

"Take yours off—too—"

Kobayakawa gave a chuckle at the urgency in his

voice. "You want me to?"

What a mean question. He was appalled that Kobayakawa had the time to think about it. If Kobayakawa told him he wouldn't do it, would Sawa just accept it, like Kobayakawa had said he would? Sawa bit his lip and stared up at the man above him.

Kobayakawa was smiling down at him insufferably. The sight of such a rapturous smile would destroy Sawa's resolve. But at last he found his voice: "Take it off."

"Are you sure?"

This question was his reward. Kobayakawa understood exactly how Sawa would react to everything, and he was making Sawa take control.

Making him choose to have sex with Kobayakawa.

The man he'd fallen for was a little shocking. But Sawa had made his decision. This was the man who had fascinated him, and it wasn't as if he'd been seduced: he'd chosen to be here. So there was no going back now.

He gave Kobayakawa a kiss instead of answering. Taking that as his signal, Kobayakawa's fingers trailed over the inside of Sawa's thigh and touched the place behind him. Sawa's hips jumped at the intense, unfamiliar feeling.

"What's wrong?"

"Uh—nothing."

Lacking experience, Sawa hadn't known that Kobayakawa would use that part of him. He understood it immediately, but he didn't know what he should say.

Meeting Sawa's ambiguous response with a laugh,

Kobayakawa pushed his finger inside him.

Although Sawa was relatively wet from the fluids he had released, that place didn't allow things to enter easily. Kobayakawa twisted his finger around in order to get Sawa used to it, and caressed the other part of Sawa with his other hand.

"Uzuki—"

"Put your feet flat. I think that'll make it easier."

Sawa obeyed Kobayakawa's sincere expression. Once he'd repositioned himself, Kobayakawa, in all his nakedness, started to lightly stimulate the inside of Sawa's thighs, and his body shook with his passion.

Kobayakawa felt it, and rubbed himself against Sawa.

"Nn—no—" Sawa was surprised at the flirtatiously timid cry he'd uttered, and covered his mouth. But try as he might to contain it, waves of pleasure washed over him one after another. They wouldn't stop. He didn't know what to do.

"What's wrong?"

Sawa shook his head fiercely.

"It's okay to make noise if you like it. I like hearing your sexy voice," Kobayakawa said, nibbling on Sawa's earlobe, deliberately exhaling against his skin. Sawa pressed his face into Kobayakawa's shoulder, tensing the muscles of his lower body and tightening the place where Kobayakawa's finger was.

"It's okay. Try to get tighter."

His inviting voice made Sawa shudder, even as he wanted to obey it. But he didn't know how. Uneasy and full of despair, Sawa bit his lip.

He wants me to do something—

"If you don't tighten it, you have to move with my finger."

"But I don't know how—"

Inside, Kobayakawa's finger dragged against Sawa's inner walls, places he had never been touched before. His hips rose reflexively, and he knew that inside, in that place where Kobayakawa was pushing against him, he was growing ripe for more.

"Do you get it? Move with my finger."

Sawa nodded in response, not speaking.

"I'm going to move it slowly, so you try to follow it. Picture it in your mind."

Sawa obediently closed his eyes. That instant, Kobayakawa's touches grew more rigorous, driving into his body.

"Ungh!"

"Be strong for this part—there. Now there are two fingers inside. Can you feel them?"

Pain accompanied the feeling of such a tight place being stretched open. The stimulation of his folds burned into crackling embers as the fingers dragged at his skin.

Sawa barely slipped free of a burgeoning desire to scream. Growing tight again, he felt deeply unfulfilled. He clamped down inside harder than ever.

"That's good." Kobayakawa gave him a passing grade for his work, looking satisfied. "You have to understand exactly how it works or you're the one who's going to get hurt."

He easily pulled his fingers free of the constricted space. Sawa clamped down swiftly, but he was too late.

Squeezing against nothing now, even greater passion gathered in his inner walls.

"Now I'm going to do three."

It was as if Kobayakawa could hear the cries of Sawa's heart. At precisely the right moment, he pushed open the tight space and forced another finger inside.

"Ah—ahh!"

The front of Sawa's body reacted enthusiastically, as well, to the feeling of being penetrated behind. He was so excited that he only barely fought back his orgasm. His heart thudded furiously in his chest, but he couldn't contain himself and he wet Kobayakawa's fingers.

Sawa's mind was trying to surrender to a sensation that even he didn't understand. It wasn't simple pleasure. It was a deeper emotion, intricately connected to his heart, filling him with rapture and blanketing his reason and his consciousness.

As Kobayakawa's fingers moved roughly inside him, it welled up in him, and he could no longer hold it back.

"Nngh—Uzuki! Uzuki!"

It wasn't localized: the sensation spread throughout his entire body. Sawa wriggled his hips, his legs convulsing. His lust, which had no other outlet, sought this release and poured over him. His desire for Kobayakawa filled him, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

"I—I can't. Uzuki—ah!"

His throat curved back, releasing rapid breaths. He was losing awareness, feeling as if his body would fly into pieces.

"Junya—you're so tight!"

"Ah! Please—do something!" Sawa tried to push Kobayakawa's hands out of the way and reach out for him, but he still wouldn't let him.

"Uzuki, please—let me go—"

"I can't. Not yet."

As if Sawa's sudden transformation had excited Kobayakawa as well, his audacious organ touched Sawa's stomach, trailing a thready liquid over it. It avoided Sawa's own excitement and fell behind him, pushing against the closed doors of his gateway, trying to force it open and explore deep inside.

"Uzuki—Uzukiii—"

Red flashed across Sawa's vision.

Kobayakawa's fingers were nothing compared to the wedge that penetrated him. It was so much more erotic and unbelievably hard, halting the movement of Sawa's body.

"Junya. Take a slow breath. Good, now let it out. Can you feel my heartbeat inside you?" Kobayakawa stroked Sawa's cheek and pressed an affectionate kiss against it as he spoke, his voice a whispered sigh. The sound of Kobayakawa's voice brought forth an ardor from the depths of Sawa's body that clouded over his consciousness. Feeling the heartbeat of another inside him gave him an indescribable pleasure. It reassured him that he was connected with Kobayakawa, and his temperature rose.

"Ah—"

"Yes—that's good, Junya."

Sawa had gone slightly limp in response to the

penetration, but his organ quickly stood at attention once again. But there was no room to accommodate it between their closely overlapping stomachs, and it was crushed, squeezing out its juices.

"I'm going to move—" Kobayakawa pulled his hips back as he spoke.

That part of Sawa's body was stretched to its full capacity, and in the instant that his concentration slipped, it tightened again. But it was pushed open the very next moment as something hot pushed its way inside him.

"Ahh!"

"Junya—god—you're so warm."

Kobayakawa's words reawoke Sawa's urgency. His impassioned sighs grew heavier and his voice trembled.

The liquid Sawa had released made a wet smacking sound on their stomachs as Kobayakawa rhythmically beat his hips. The obscene noise only heightened Sawa's pleasure.

"Junya—let me—deeper—"

"I—I can't! I don't—know how—" His body being penetrated, Sawa was focused on pursuing the feeling of being pulled open. He couldn't spare his attention for anything else.

As it continued, a pleasure uncompromised by pain blossomed in him, filling Sawa. The exhilaration born of their flesh rubbing together tangled together with the straightforward pleasure of wanting to ejaculate, giving rise to a new pleasure inside Sawa's body. The tiny feeling slowly grew larger and conquered Sawa. As the pressure continued, his panting transformed into lurid



screams and he devoured Kobayakawa's flesh.

"Mm—I'm—I'm coming, Junya—"

An intense thrust brought Kobayakawa to the deepest point yet. As that part of Sawa's body twitched delicately, pleasure spread out through his entire body.

"Ah! Aangh! Uzuki—Uzuki—"

His member, which was already dripping with fluid, burst with the passion it had been holding back. His reaction clamped down almost painfully on Kobayakawa.

"Junya—"

He contracted several more times, sucking Kobayakawa in as if he would never let him go, and Kobayakawa's exhausted body fell across Sawa's.

Chapter Six

The height of summer was drawing closer. They were already having a heat wave.

"Junya? You're home late."

As he was taking his shoes off at the front door, Sawa's mother came in from the kitchen. She had probably been cooking something. Wiping her hands on her apron, the slap of her house slippers on the floor of the hall drew nearer.

It took a few seconds for her to reach Sawa. If the house still felt normal to him, there wouldn't have been anything unusual about that. But lately, Sawa had begun to feel ever so slightly like a visitor from another planet, and this made the event refreshing and new.

"Sorry, Mom." The laces of his sneakers were tangled, and he couldn't get them off.

"Do you want dinner?"

"Sure."

"Go ahead and take your bath, then. I'll heat up some miso soup for you while you're in there."

"I don't need a bath." He finally got the laces untied.

"Why not? Aren't you sweaty?"

"Kobayakawa let me take a shower at his place."

"Oh, I see." Sawa was flustered, but he didn't let it show in his answer. When he stood up, his mother's face

was right in front of him. "Wh—what?"

"Are you sure you're not bothering Kobayakawa's family by staying over so late all the time?"

"I told you, he lives alone."

"Oh, that's right, you did tell me that."

"Yeah," Sawa said quickly, trying to slip past his mother.

"You two aren't just goofing around, are you? You are studying?"

"What do you mean?" Sawa was so surprised that he jumped and turned around to look at his mother.

"Do you think you have time to be doing that sort of thing so soon before the exams?"

"Don't look so mean. You almost gave me a heart attack." He laughed shrilly, smiling innocently, and his mother went back to the kitchen.

"If you're not going to take a bath, just put your things away and come to the kitchen. Your father's not home yet, so leave the door unlocked."

Watching his mother walk away from him, Sawa let out a deep sigh. "Please don't scare me like that."

He went into his room and leaned back against his door, finally able to breathe again. Sawa's conscience was heavy with guilt and each of his mother's casual words had pierced him like a dagger. He was covered in a cold sweat.

He saw Kobayakawa again the day after losing his virginity.

It was the day of the ball game exposition and Sawa and Kobayakawa were supposed to compete in ping-pong. Of course, Sawa didn't have much athletic

ability so, without ever exchanging a word, the two had snuck out of the competition together and gone back to Kobayakawa's apartment.

They spent a few awkward minutes together before finally one of them had unexpectedly sought out a kiss and they'd fallen together onto the floor. Tender love had directed their caresses from there.

They licked and nibbled each other everywhere, sucking on the skin. The skin covering their bodies grew sensitive so that even the brush of a sigh excited them. But they never directly touched each other's penises. And there was no penetration.

Sawa's body was still unsettled, and just being touched made that part of him shudder painfully, but he couldn't stop thinking about the pleasure he'd experienced. Although it felt somehow masochistic, Sawa wanted to be penetrated. But Kobayakawa wouldn't give it to him.

Kobayakawa didn't want to hurt him—that's what he'd told him in his tenderly adoring voice, and Sawa didn't have much choice but to agree that was best.

Instead, Kobayakawa relieved Sawa with his fingers, which explored the inside of his body as much as he could have wanted. It let Sawa himself discover where he was weakest and let him ask to be touched there. Sawa surrendered unconditionally to the sensation of Kobayakawa violating him, even in his heart.

And so the next time they saw each other Sawa straddled Kobayakawa and took his fill of the man's body. Despite how he had acted during his first sexual experience, Sawa threw himself into the pleasure of it.

They next saw each other not two days later. And when they met, they were unable to hold back and they passed the time in sex.

Of course Sawa found it absurd. But as soon as he saw Kobayakawa's face, as soon as he heard his voice, he couldn't stop himself.

It wasn't just Sawa, either. Kobayakawa was the same.

Sawa sought Kobayakawa often, but Kobayakawa sought him even more. Thanks to their meetings, Sawa was in such a state that he had to keep his body fully covered in front of people, despite the fact that it was the middle of summer. Even in a bathrobe, the front could open and the marks of his love affair would be undeniably evident on his skin.

Most of them were concentrated around his nipples. Perhaps because he'd had sex with women before, Kobayakawa concentrated his caresses almost exclusively on Sawa's chest. He wouldn't even stop when it was sticky with his saliva. He would scrape his fingers over it playfully, bite it, skim it with his lips, lick it with his tongue, and finally suck on the skin.

Sawa was sure he wouldn't feel anything, no matter how fervently Kobayakawa caressed his chest—he wasn't a girl, after all. But he had been mistaken.

He did feel something when Kobayakawa touched him, and his nipples got hard. Once they'd become sensitive, he reacted almost painfully to even a warm breath, wanting to be touched even more. Sawa was overcome with everything he was learning about sex.

"I can't even wear shorts now," Sawa said in

amazement as he looked his body over once again. He'd asked Kobayakawa to at least stop leaving marks on his neck. His mother had found one once on the back of his neck and he'd been in a tight spot trying to explain it. Sawa had told her that he'd been stung by a bug, and she'd believed this transparent excuse, but it would get suspicious if it started happening all the time.

Kobayakawa had looked unhappy, but Sawa's pleading seemed to reach him. But Sawa was pretty sure that in exchange, he would only intensify his attentions elsewhere.

Just tracing the path of his marks, the movements of Kobayakawa's tongue came alive again.

"Oh, man." Remembering made Sawa's body glow with passion.

"Junya, what are you doing? Hurry up or your soup's going to get cold."

"A—all right, I'm coming!"

What timing. Sawa smiled ruefully at his own debauched desires.

"Is it really all right for you to stay at Kobayakawa's house?"

"How many times do I have to tell you it's fine?"

As Sawa ate, he responded once again to his mother's question. She just wouldn't accept it.

"Well, two high school boys alone together...and there's the question of who's going to feed you."

"I explained that. He still lives alone and there's a diner nearby that's really good, really cheap, and that delivers."

"But really," his mother sighed worriedly.

His grandmother had fallen recently, and his mother was going to go help care for her. His father was taking some upcoming vacation days off to go with her. They'd asked Sawa what he wanted to do and suggested that he go along since he was on vacation from his summer classes, too.

But he had refused. Even if he didn't have classes, he still had to prepare for the exams.

"Can't you study there?"

"You're only saying that because you're not the one who has to study. If you drag me all that way to visit, there's no way I'm going to be able to have time alone."

Most important of all, Kobayakawa had told Sawa to come stay with him now that Sawa's prep school was on vacation.

They were seeing each other all the time, but still Sawa had only spent the night a handful of times. They'd both been holding back since he had to go to prep school and bravely bearing their reluctance to be apart.

But now that the school was on vacation, things were different. The fact that Sawa had to study remained unchanged, but as far as his feelings were concerned, it was a very different situation.

"If you're that worried, you can call me every night. I'll give you the number."

His parents had been uncomfortable about leaving him home alone, and they'd first suggested asking his older brother to come back home. But unfortunately his brother was too busy, as usual, so Sawa had suggested

studying with Kobayakawa at his house.

His mother knew that Kobayakawa's father was the leader of the Koryu Alliance. Suzushima had told her so at their conference before the vacation. He'd also told her about how Kobayakawa had gotten a good grade thanks to Sawa's help, that Kobayakawa was very grateful, and that he was a good boy even if he did have ties to a yakuza family. She trusted him completely.

So she should have agreed, even reluctantly, but here she was again today, the day before they were to set out, asking the same questions over again. He understood why she would be worried, but even Sawa was surprised by how much.

"I won't go that far overboard. Well, it'll only be a week, I suppose. Take good care of yourself."

"I will. Thanks for the food, Mom."

"Done already?"

"Yeah, I'm full." If he stayed with her much longer, he didn't know what she might say to him. And he was happy to escape back to his room.

"We're leaving early tomorrow, so we won't wake you up."

"All right. Take care. Tell Grandma I hope she feels better," Sawa said and went back to his room.

"Good work."

The next afternoon, Sawa was already at Kobayakawa's house. They went to his room and, once Sawa told him about the night before, Kobayakawa reacted with that line.

"You're only saying that because you didn't have to do it."

"No, I didn't have to do it," Kobayakawa replied, mimicking Sawa's sulky words.

Supposedly they were equals, but Kobayakawa had a habit of teasing Sawa. Maybe it was unavoidable since Kobayakawa took the lead so often in their sex lives. But Sawa was a man, too, and Kobayakawa's attitude annoyed him.

"If you're going to be like that, I'm going home."

"Junya?" He didn't seem to understand why Sawa was upset. Sawa walked toward the door, and Kobayakawa came chasing quickly after him.

"Are you leaving?"

But he didn't apologize. An assertive man like him wouldn't be able to recognize his faults easily. That was the way he was, and Sawa loved him, so maybe it was stupid of him to get upset. But even so, Sawa couldn't help being who he was, and it aggravated him to admit the truth of that.

Kobayakawa knew he wasn't going to leave. Sawa could tell. And since Kobayakawa wasn't going to apologize, Sawa had to fold.

"Jun-ya."

"What would you do if I left?" Sawa stopped just inside the front door and turned back to look at Kobayakawa. He bit down on his lip.

"Come on, you're not really going to leave."

Now that Kobayakawa had gone and said that, there was nothing Sawa could do but admit defeat.

"I hate you."

"Are you sure about that?"

Kobayakawa lifted Sawa's drooping head with a finger under his chin and drew closer to his tilted face. He pressed his lips against Sawa's, as if fondly tasting him, and as he pulled away their gazes locked, close enough to feel each other's breath. They kissed again, deeply.

"I've been waiting for today," Kobayakawa whispered happily.

"Me, too."

"Really?" Kobayakawa asked between adoring kisses.

"Really," Sawa answered between the same kisses. Their kisses grew deeper and his body temperature shot up.

Ever since the moment Sawa had arrived and seen Kobayakawa's face when he'd opened the door, Sawa had been waiting for this moment. Even when he'd been annoyed with himself for letting the kisses soothe him, he'd been waiting for it.

Kobayakawa's hands moved to Sawa's groin and stripped away the clothes that were in his way. Sawa was already getting excited. Kobayakawa gave him a light caress, then reached toward the back with his fingers.

Sawa pulled Kobayakawa's belt off and guided him free of his pants.

Even just a slight rubbing against the entrance made its petals bloom, easily accepting Kobayakawa inside. Even in this rather unnatural standing position, facing each other, the two burned for each other and encountered no difficulty. When Kobayakawa hooked

Sawa's leg over his arm, their balance may have been bad, but their union was that much deeper.

"Uzuki—"

"It's so warm inside you—"

Even Kobayakawa's voice brought him pleasure. Sawa squeezed hard against the hot, familiar flesh and tried to coax from it his fill of the caresses it brought.

"So—tight!"

"Do it, Uzuki—do it harder!"

It had taken only the blink of an eye for Sawa's newly awakened desire to mature.

Since Kobayakawa had lost his virginity in elementary school, he knew how to make a body ready for him. Sawa was carefully soothed, then driven wild. And in less than one month, Sawa knew not only how to feel the pleasure that was given to him, but also how to take pleasure for himself.

Sawa felt that was abandoning himself to sex with Kobayakawa. It depressed him to think how much he wanted to do it.

"Junya—it's so good—"

At the same moment that Sawa clamped down strongly, he felt the violent release of Kobayakawa's passion deep inside his body. As the droplets stained the shameless walls of his flesh, Sawa felt himself becoming something other than himself.

"Ah—aangh!"

In a sudden swoon, Sawa's knees crumpled under him. He felt the thick ooze flowing out of him as Kobayakawa slipped out, almost dragging his inner walls away with it.

"Nngh!"

A small smile came over Kobayakawa's lips as he noticed Sawa's body suddenly tense up. He regretted ever so slightly abandoning Sawa alone on the cliffs of his desire, after rising so high together just a moment before.

Not having to worry about when to come home or when to get up was enough to make the two young men slack off for everything. After seeking out each other's bodies in the hallway, they had sex yet again in bed, then took a bath together.

Sitting across from each other in the full-to-the-brim bathtub, Kobayakawa hugged Sawa's legs against him and massaged his calves. Maybe it was because his hair was slicked back from his face, but he looked more adult than usual.

"It's a little late to be asking now, but—"

Relaxing his body in the warm water, Sawa looked up at the ceiling. "Is it okay that you didn't go see your family?"

"You're right, it's a little late. Why are you asking about that now?" Kobayakawa arched an eyebrow slightly at Sawa's question. "If I'd gone, I wouldn't be here taking a bath with you right now."

Sawa shrugged at Kobayakawa's grumpy response. "Are you going home when you graduate?" he asked quickly, trying to change the subject, but Kobayakawa's expression clouded even further.

By the time he realized he'd made a mistake, it was

already too late, and a leg stretched out to touch Sawa's crotch.

"Wait—"

He hurried to bring his knees together, but it was too late. Kobayakawa could even move his toes skillfully, and he stimulated Sawa's penis intently.

"You want to get rid of me that badly?"

"That's not what I—nngh."

"Then don't ask stupid questions," he said, tossing Sawa's desire aside only half-roused.

"Uzuki."

Sawa was just worried. He was afraid that, despite how happy they were right now, sooner or later reality would hunt them down, and he would get swallowed up by it. It was because Sawa was so happy being with Kobayakawa that it scared him to think about what could happen later. And even though it scared him, he still had to think about it.

They may have believed that their lives belonged only to them, but Kobayakawa lived in a world that wouldn't let things go that easily. Sawa knew that people from Kobayakawa's family had called while he'd been staying there.

Each time, Kobayakawa had moved to a place where Sawa couldn't hear in order to argue with them. Sawa didn't know what they were talking about, but he knew he was probably happier not finding out.

That was why Kobayakawa got upset when this subject came up.

"Uzuki—"

"Let's go get something to eat. I'm starving."

Kobayakawa managed a smile. Drawn in by his smile, Sawa smiled back and realized that he was hungry, too. They'd rushed straight into sex as soon as he'd arrived and had never eaten lunch.

"Me too, now that you mention it."

"Then let's hurry up and get dressed. I found a really good ramen place across from the station a couple days ago. It's really small, so it fills up quick and they close once they use up the noodles they made for the day."

"Don't say that—I'm going to start panicking."

Sawa hurried to climb out of the bathtub and followed Kobayakawa out of the bathroom. Dripping water, they wiped each other's bodies dry and got dressed. Kobayakawa used a blow drier to dry his hair faster.

"Can't you just let the rest dry naturally?"

Kobayakawa's hair was still mostly wet, but it didn't seem to bother him. He brushed his hair back from his face with his fingers, put on jeans and a button-down shirt, and slipped on tinted sunglasses and sandals. He wound up looking like a complete thug.

"I don't know if I can be seen in public with you."

"You jealous of my look?"

Sawa patted his wet hair, but in the mirror he never looked like anything more than a toddler playing dress up. He had such a baby-face that with Kobayakawa next to him for contrast, Sawa couldn't escape the fact that he looked like a child.

Kobayakawa must have thought the same thing, since he burst out laughing. Sawa peered at him in the

mirror. "It's not very nice to laugh at someone's hard work."

"S—sorry, but...it's just funny," Kobayakawa apologized, laughing.

Laughing together over something so trivial made Kobayakawa happy—he was loving it. But as Sawa pulled his shoes on, he felt sick—precisely because Kobayakawa was having so much fun.

"Junya, I'm sorry. Really."

"Whatever. Laugh all you want." Sawa stood to leave. The moment he put his hand on the door, before Sawa could even open it, the doorknob turned.

"Hey—"

"Who are you?"

Sawa stumbled forward. The voice he heard overhead was so deep it dragged on the ground, lifeless and uninflected. Slowly raising his eyes, he saw a man in glasses wearing a double-breasted suit—the one he'd seen at the school in May.

His hair was stiffly set today, too, not a strand out of place. Sawa was right in front of him, but the man's eyes passed over him to look at Kobayakawa.

"Iwatsuki—"

Sawa gasped. It was the name of Kobayakawa's guardian. But Kobayakawa's reaction made him feel undeniably disturbed.

"What are you doing here?" Kobayakawa asked in a thoroughly displeased and arrogant tone.

"There is something I would like to speak with you about."

"What is it?"

"Are you certain that you wish me to discuss it here?" Iwatsuki asked calmly, his glance gliding momentarily to Sawa.

"Fine." Noticing his glance, Kobayakawa replied grudgingly.

"Uzuki..."

"Sorry, Junya. I've got to talk to him for a minute. Do you mind waiting for me at the McDonalds by the station? You can get a coffee or something."

So they couldn't discuss whatever this was about in front of Sawa. And Sawa couldn't refuse to go. He got a bad feeling and hesitated for a moment, then forced a smile onto his face.

"I heard they have new stuff on their menu. I could give them a try while I'm there."

"Don't go crazy. We're going to go eat dinner afterwards."

"Then don't keep me waiting too long."

Sawa's half-joking words produced a relieved expression on Kobayakawa's face. "I'll come as soon as I can."

"Okay. See you there, then."

He said goodbye to Kobayakawa and bowed his head to Iwatsuki, then went out the front door. When Sawa heard the door close behind him, he was gripped by an impulse to run back to it, but he fought it back and pushed the button for the elevator.

Come quick, he prayed in his heart. If you don't come, I'm just going to worry about what you two are talking about in there.

When he'd seen Iwatsuki, Kobayakawa's expression

had been unimaginably, even frighteningly tense and grim. What reason could he possibly have to look like that when Iwatsuki was supposed to be his guardian?

Sawa's thronging doubts made his heart beat faster, and uneasiness that he couldn't define pressed around him. He was assaulted by the feeling that his happiness was crumbling away beneath his feet, but why?

Sawa took a seat at the counter facing a window. It looked out on the road, and he watched people go by for a long time.

The ice in his iced coffee was melting, diluting the taste. He sat stirring the straw in the cup, never drinking it. It had been more than half an hour since he'd left Kobayakawa's apartment.

"So much for coming as soon as he could," Sawa muttered. The sound of his discontent fell to the counter and was slowly absorbed by the sweat coating the paper cup of his coffee.

Maybe he's not even coming. The thought flashed through his mind.

He could act smooth and say that Kobayakawa was only being himself, but Sawa was strongly aware of how different the worlds they lived in were, probably more than anyone else. But since Sawa understood that they were different, he could tell himself that it didn't matter. He had desired Kobayakawa because he knew that they were different.

Kobayakawa lived in a world completely distinct from the ordinary world. Sawa had believed he could do

the same, but something held him back.

His fingers were interlaced and resting on the countertop, trembling. "Come quick. I'll wait five more minutes, and if you're not here, I'm going to order a hamburger."

"Uzuki is not coming."

Sawa jerked his head up in surprise at the sound of the voice. In the window, he saw the reflection of a man in a suit, and he turned around. A shudder ran down his spine at the cold gaze the man was giving him. "Where's Uz—I mean, Kobayakawa?"

"Uzuki has urgent business to attend to, and has returned to Tokyo."

"To Tokyo?" Kobayakawa hadn't told him anything about that.

"I serve as Uzuki Kobayakawa's guardian. My name is Soichi Iwatsuki. Uzuki told me that you have helped him in school."

Sawa jumped as the man put his hand inside his jacket, but all he pulled out was a cigarette. Iwatsuki hunched over slightly and lit the cigarette that dangled from his lips.

"I called Uzuki several times to ask him to come back, but he said that he would not be able to under any circumstances. As I was making no progress, I was forced to come here personally to persuade him," he said, sounding surprised. He blew out a cloud of smoke and invited Sawa to come outside with him with a glance. Sawa hurried after him. The man stopped at an alley near the restaurant.

Sawa remembered how upset Kobayakawa had

been by all the calls he'd gotten from his family. They had all been from this man.

"When will Uzuki be coming back here?"

"Tomorrow."

Iwatsuki's answer put Sawa's mind at ease. "Well, then that's not so bad."

"The day after tomorrow, Uzuki intends to skip his induction ceremony to take over the family business, and run away with you."

"What?" Sawa couldn't follow this sudden turn in the conversation.

"Run...away with me?"

"Of course, he ought to understand that it would not be constructive to spend the rest of his life as a fugitive. I am ignoring his foolish claim that he wishes to continue his current lifestyle until graduating from high school." Iwatsuki flicked the long column of ash on his cigarette onto the ground. "Such selfishness will not be tolerated. The transfer of power was decided upon Uzuki's admission to high school. He should realize that the only reason he was transferred to this school was to distance him from the internal conflicts going on before his takeover. If he cannot fulfill his obligations, he is a fool who understands nothing about the morale of the entire group." Iwatsuki's impassivity cracked, and he made a sour face.

Sawa didn't understand the majority of what Iwatsuki had said. All he had gleaned was that Uzuki had been forced to go back to Tokyo for something very important, but he was going to run from it and that was getting him into trouble.

"And it is all because of you."

"Huh?"

That was the only opportunity Sawa got to question Iwatsuki's flat announcement. Iwatsuki glared harshly at Sawa, his face an expressionless iron mask, not moving so much as an eyebrow. Sawa thought he must have done something wrong, but only one thing came to mind.

"Please let me talk to Kobayakawa."

"That is impossible." Iwatsuki's response allowed no argument. Sawa guessed that Iwatsuki was trying to pry him and Kobayakawa apart. But why? Sawa couldn't understand it. But what else could it be?

"Why?"

"Uzuki asked me to give you his deepest apologies, and to convey to you his plans to flee tomorrow. I am Uzuki's guardian. He trusts me. But he has rarely asked me to do anything for him. As he requested that I do this, I could hardly refuse him."

Trust? Just what was the bond between Kobayakawa and this man? Iwatsuki had been in the gang before Kobayakawa was even born, so he knew things about Kobayakawa's past that Sawa didn't. About his childhood, about elementary school.

And Kobayakawa knew Iwatsuki, the man who was always by his side.

How should Sawa feel about being chased from the apartment, then? Obviously Kobayakawa hadn't been himself. But even after his talk with Iwatsuki was over, Kobayakawa hadn't come here to see Sawa.

There was some "business" that made him leave Sawa behind. What was going on in Kobayakawa's life?

What was going to happen between them? Sawa didn't know anything about Kobayakawa, so all he could do was imagine from what Iwatsuki had told him.

"But I have a personal reason for speaking with you."

"Which is?"

"Uzuki is very important to me since he is the successor to our gang's boss, for whom I hold a deep respect. Whatever Uzuki may believe, and whatever he may tell you, this is a fact which will never change. By which I mean that, no matter what you two may think right now, in the end the worlds you two inhabit are very different."

Sawa had already realized that himself.

"Even if you disguise yourselves as students for a little while, you can never escape that. In the end it will catch up with you and tear you apart."

Reality was facing Sawa down once again. Hearing its arguments once again, he accepted it.

"As you know, Uzuki tends to get carried away with himself. I value that part of his personality. There are not that many people who can carry on the Koryu Alliance after this, and that is why I would prefer not to inflict unnecessary wounds on Uzuki. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Iwatsuki's eyes glinted fiercely behind his glasses.

"What do you want me to do about it?" Sawa asked, his breath uneven.

"I would like for you to be the one to distance yourself from Uzuki. If you care for him at all, you will do it." Iwatsuki had no need for excuses or justifications

or explanations. And he wasn't going to give Sawa time to consider the situation or to wonder about what might happen later.

"Does Uzuki know about this?"

"Of course not. As far as Uzuki is concerned, I am his only ally."

"And you're going to betray that trust?"

"I am doing nothing of the kind." Iwatsuki dropped what was left of his cigarette and ground it out with his shoe. He took another cigarette out and placed it in his mouth.

"What do you mean?"

"We are discussing you distancing yourself from him."

The distinctive smell of a Zippo lighter tickled Sawa's nostrils.

"Uzuki is obsessed with you. We have attempted to reason with him, but he refuses to accept his place. That is why I am asking you to betray Uzuki for us."

"I can't."

"You're going to," Iwatsuki answered, and Sawa could say nothing. "Perhaps you have forgotten, but I belong to a gang. I would appreciate it if you did not assume that we operate under the same rules as ordinary people. You want to be able to live the rest of your life without fear, I presume?" A frigid smile came over Iwatsuki's face as he made this spine-chilling threat. "You want to be able to have a family, I presume?"

"Are you threatening me? A mobster like you hassling a lowly high school student like me?"

"Certainly not. I am only here to ask a favor. If

you care about Uzuki, you will cooperate." Iwatsuki faced Sawa as they talked. Behind him, they heard high-pitched laughter as a group of high school girls walked past them. It was a summer evening like any other. Or it should have been, but there was something electric in the air around Sawa.

The sun was setting in the west, but the heated atmosphere never changed.

In the sweltering heat, Sawa stared down at his lengthening shadow.

"...what should I do?"

Once Sawa got home to his empty house, he sat alone in his room. As night fell and he gazed at the tiny light of his fluorescent lamp, he began to imagine that it had all just been a dream. Kobayakawa transferring in after the vacation in May, their kiss the night before the test, the sex they had had since then—everything.

When summer break was over and he went back to school, no one would remember Kobayakawa.

Days would go by without the slightest change. Sawa would take his college exams and pass them, he would live as a normal college student, and he would go on to an office job, and then...

"No—"

Sawa knew firsthand that it hadn't been a dream.

Kobayakawa's eyes, which seemed to penetrate straight to the soul; the warmth of his arms as he held Sawa; his passion—he remembered them all as parts of reality.

Sawa hugged his knees to his chest and pressed his

forehead against them. He was desperately fighting back his urge to cry when the phone rang loudly. The noise surprised him and he jumped.

He glanced at the time and saw that it was nearing midnight. Maybe it was from his parents—but no, it wouldn't be them.

Sawa picked up the phone, filled with a faint hope. "Hello...?"

"It's me."

Goosebumps rose on his skin at the voice in his ear. He realized just how much he had been waiting to hear that voice.

"Uzuki? Where are you?" Sawa asked desperately, gripping the phone tightly.

"I'm still in Tokyo."

The voice was a little whiny—it was definitely Kobayakawa. Even the faint sound of his breathing filled Sawa with joy.

"Junya." Kobayakawa spoke Sawa's name with a quiet sigh. The sound of it was ticklish.

"What?"

"I'm sorry about today." His voice was lower than usual. He was trying not to be overheard. "The talk came out of nowhere and before I even realized what was going on, they shoved me into a car and took me back to Tokyo. I asked Iwatsuki to explain things to you, but I don't know. Did he?"

"Uh—yeah."

Explain things—all he'd said was that Kobayakawa had gone home.

"He's kind of antisocial and inflexible, but he's not

a bad guy. I trust him more than any of the rest of my dad's guys."

"R—really."

"I guess because I've known him all my life, he acts really full of himself with me, but he's a good guy. You can't just write him off."

Sawa could say nothing. Kobayakawa's home was clearly not a place where he had felt comfortable, and Iwatsuki was important to him. Sawa would never tell him that Iwatsuki had threatened him, no matter what.

"And about tomorrow." Kobayakawa's voice was low. "It's all going according to plan, so don't be late."

The conviction in his voice made Sawa want to cry.

"I think if we can completely disappear for two or three days, they'll give up. Then we can enjoy the rest of the summer all we want, just the two of us."

"Okay."

"Junya."

"What?"

"If I told you that I love you, would you laugh?"

Sawa's entire body quivered at Kobayakawa's hesitant words, confessed amid sighs. Kobayakawa had often told Sawa that he liked him, but this was the first time he'd used the word love.

Sawa's heart squeezed tight at this first confession. He felt as if the emotions that the words "I love you" implied had passed directly into his heart.

Affection, trust, devotion. Beautiful feelings filled Sawa's heart and swelled him up to feelings of joy that he knew could never again be equaled.

"I wouldn't laugh. I—I feel the same way."

"Sorry, Junya. Someone's coming. I've got to go."

Suddenly, the line on the other end grew noisy. He wondered what had happened when he heard the word "Later" and the call was cut off.

Sawa clung to the phone, which only made a sterile beeping noise. He let out a small sigh.

That was enough, he thought.

When Iwatsuki had told him to distance himself from Kobayakawa, he had resented it. Why did he have to pay the price?

Sawa and Kobayakawa were in love—that was all. They were both men. When they graduated high school, or maybe a little afterwards, it was practically guaranteed that they would break up. So then why did the two of them have to be ripped apart now, for a completely unrelated reason?

And, worst of all, Sawa had to betray Kobayakawa without ever telling him why.

The reason Sawa had agreed to Iwatsuki's plan wasn't because of his threats. Sawa realized, of course, that Iwatsuki hadn't been bluffing when he said those things, and he was terrified of the sharpness in his eyes, like quick, cold blades. But later, he had realized that the man was truly concerned for Uzuki, and Sawa's decision was based on concern for Kobayakawa.

Kobayakawa may not have been fond of the world he'd been born into, but he didn't hate it. Rather, he had accepted it and had decided to live the life of a gangster.

And from Iwatsuki's point of view, after watching

Kobayakawa grow up, not many people could carry on the organization like Kobayakawa. And since Kobayakawa was so valuable, he said he didn't want to "inflict unnecessary wounds" on him.

Sawa didn't know the rules that governed their world, but he was sure that blowing off his induction ceremony would hold Kobayakawa back for the rest of his life. Sawa didn't like to think about it, but he could tell how bad things would be from the way Iwatsuki had acted.

Kobayakawa would probably consider him a traitor. He would call him a coward. But Sawa believed he could handle it, because Kobayakawa had made him so happy when he said he loved him.

That evening, when the chimes announcing nine o'clock rang, Sawa was sitting on a bench outside the north entrance of the station they had agreed upon. It was a side entrance that was only open from nine in the morning to ten at night, so there were hardly any people around. Even the station attendants had left. There was only one old-fashioned lantern standing beside it, so elementary schools always warned their students to stay away from this place at night.

The weather reports had said it would be another sultry night. Moths appeared out of the darkness to circle the lantern. Heavy clouds were spreading through the pitch black sky, making the waning moon look even brighter.

At last Sawa heard the clanging sound of footsteps

descending the stairs.

It was Kobayakawa. He had Sawa's ticket with him. Now the two of them could run up to the next train that arrived, get on just before it left, and disappear together for a little while.

"Junya."

Kobayakawa appeared from the shadows of the stairway, eying the surroundings. A black hat was pulled low over his eyes and, despite the darkness, he wore darkly tinted sunglasses. He was dressed casually, in jeans and a T-shirt, and all he had with him was a sports bag. He stood behind the ticket gates.

Sawa hadn't been able to see Kobayakawa since he was taken away the night before. It had only been a little more than a day, but it felt much longer.

Sawa's heart grew warm. "Uzuki."

"Junya, hurry. Here's your ticket."

As soon as Sawa stood up, a black car pulled up nearby. Several large men wearing mean faces and black suits climbed out of it.

"Mister Uzuki, this is much too important a time to do anything rash."

Kobayakawa's expression changed at the sight of the men. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"We knew you would come here. We've been waiting for you. Please come with us." One of the men reached out to grab Kobayakawa's arm, but he escaped his grasp. "The induction ceremony is tomorrow. The boss is worried about you. Please don't do anything stupid."

"Damn it! Junya, go on and take the train without

me. I'll come join you soon."

"He won't be doing that."

Before Kobayakawa had time to react, another man had grabbed Sawa's arm and twisted it behind him. "Augh!"

"Junya!"

Kobayakawa leaned across the ticket gate. The men tried to catch hold of him then, but he slipped away from them.

"Let Junya go! This doesn't involve him!"

"Are you certain of that?"

A man climbed out of the car, cutting Kobayakawa off.

"Iwatsuki—"

"This is the boy who deceived you, Uzuki Kobayakawa, heir to the Koryu Alliance. He has attempted to keep you from attending your induction ceremony. Is it not possible that he belongs to our rival family?"

"Wh—what the hell are you saying? Junya has nothing to do with them! I know it!"

"And if we suppose that that was part of his strategy?"

"Iwatsuki, how dare you—" Kobayakawa glowered at Iwatsuki, whose expression remained unchanged.

Iwatsuki stood in front of Sawa and reached out to hold his slender chin. He stared down at him and, only a moment later, he raised his arm.

"What're you—"

Before Kobayakawa could finish, a dull crack diffused into the thick summer air. Sawa's cheek stung



from Iwatsuki's merciless strike. Sawa stood there in a daze, his ears ringing.

"Did you think that you could seduce Uzuki Kobayakawa of the Koryu Alliance and not have to face the consequences?"

His tone was not violent, but the threat in his rumbling voice made Sawa shudder. Unlike those guys who put all their effort into looking dangerous, Iwatsuki always dealt with people in a cold, sinister way. His detachment made him that much scarier, and sent a cold shiver down Sawa's spine.

"Junya, are you okay? Junya!" Kobayakawa shouted desperately. He was closing the distance between them, trying desperately to get closer to Sawa.

Seeing his face, Sawa felt as if his chest was being crushed.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry, he apologized fervently in his heart. But now he had to say the opposite.

"Stay away..." Sawa's head drooped. If he saw Kobayakawa's face, he wouldn't be able to say it. If he looked into his eyes, his heart would shatter.

"Junya—"

"Stay away from me!"

The man twisted Sawa's arm further, and he screamed. A cut had opened in his mouth when Iwatsuki struck him. When Sawa spoke, the taste of blood spread over his tongue.

"Junya..."

"Since yesterday, it's just been this string of horrible experiences. It's not funny anymore. I want to live a normal life. Why did this have to happen to me?"

Did I do something wrong?" The muscles in his stomach tensed. "I don't care about your induction ceremony. You decided to do this all by yourself. It's not fair to get me involved. I was watching out for you since we were in the same class, and I guess I got carried away. My parents tried to warn me. But this is taking it way too far."

Sawa recited the words he'd prepared the night before. As he chewed Kobayakawa out, Sawa found it odd that he had nothing to express but hate. If he were in Kobayakawa's place, he would start to doubt everything he was being told. The more important someone is to you, the more impossible it can be to forgive them. But Kobayakawa's reaction was different.

"Why are you saying those things, Junya? Are you to trying to protect me? You'd never say stuff like that. Did someone get to you? Junya!"

Sawa's heart fluttered at the desperation in Kobayakawa's cry.

"Uzuki." Iwatsuki calmly placed himself between Sawa and Kobayakawa. "Doesn't it upset you to hear all this?"

"Of course. Sawa would never say that stuff seriously."

"You believe this boy more than you believe me?"

"Iwatsuki—why are you asking such a stupid question? How could you forget what I told you yesterday?"

"Do you know what will happen if you blow off your induction ceremony?"

"Yeah."

"And do you realize that those of us protecting you will have to cut off our little fingers?"

Kobayakawa's face tensed instantly.

"If we accept that this man has seduced you and you go back to the compound, everything will be forgiven. And if we bring back a finger..."

"If you want a finger, take mine," Kobayakawa shouted.

"...why do you need a finger?"

"I'll go back, and I'll offer my finger. So let him go."

Kobayakawa's audacious words were met with silence. He allowed the men who had closed on him to seize his arms and they passed through the ticket gate. He gave up his freedom, but Kobayakawa never once doubted Sawa.

"He's important to me."

Sawa's heart and body were stripped of everything they had, and Kobayakawa was trying to put an end to it.

"Are you for real?"

He didn't want it this way. If everything ended like this, Sawa would never be able to forget Kobayakawa, and Kobayakawa would never be able to forget him, either. It would be terrible. Sawa wanted this one moment to be almost unreal for Kobayakawa. He couldn't let their relationship or the memory of him intrude on the rest of Kobayakawa's life.

"Jun—"

He returned his averted eyes to Kobayakawa.

"I wasn't really serious about it. I'm not going to

run away with you."

"Junya..."

"Didn't I just tell you? I just felt sorry for you. How could I ever get serious with a gangster? I have to take my exams. I just wanted to make myself look good to the teacher so I could get a recommendation from him. But I got tired of acting like the perfect honor student. You came along at exactly the right time."

"How can you—"

"You still don't get it?" Sawa barked at Kobayakawa's continuing disbelief. "I didn't do anything wrong, and now they're hitting me, they're twisting my arm—give me a break! Damn it, that's enough! Let go! You could have broken my arm!" He spun around and glared at the man, who released his arm. He rubbed his elbow with his other hand, but his fingers were convulsing. "So that's it, then. I'm done playing this game. I hope you had fun pretending to be friends."

He grinned.

"And it wasn't all bad, was it? You got to feel what it was like to have a friend who takes you seriously for a little while."

The hardest thing for Sawa to say cut Kobayakawa the deepest.

"So it was all a game?" Kobayakawa groaned.

"Yup."

"You were just pretending to be my friend?"

"That's right."

It wasn't true. But he had to say these things. Whether Kobayakawa believed him or not, Sawa would

always claim it wasn't true.

"Get away from me," Kobayakawa said in a low voice. "I never want to see your face again. Get out of my sight!"

That was the first time he'd heard Kobayakawa yell like that. His eardrums rattled, his heart was hollowed out, and sunk deep into his chest. His heart hurt as if it was being dug out of him. He knew it was his own fault, but it hurt all the same.

"I'd leave even if you didn't tell me to," Sawa shouted back with the same intensity, then turned his back. A part of him realized that this was probably the last time they would ever see each other.

Even once the second semester started, he was certain that Kobayakawa wouldn't be back. And just as he had imagined the night before, once Kobayakawa was gone, his life would continue as normal. Everything would be preserved in Sawa's heart as only memories.

"Junya," Kobayakawa called out from behind him. "Junya! Look at me, Junya!" His heartbreaking shouts made Sawa's knees feel weak.

It would have been so much easier to turn around now and throw himself into Kobayakawa's arms. He would have been so happy. Sawa would have been overjoyed to tell him that it had all been an act.

But he couldn't do it. And since he couldn't do it, he walked faster, refusing to turn around.

As he was walking for home, he noticed small stains on the asphalt. The damp atmosphere that clung to his skin was making his sweat drip off of him. Sawa clumsily wiped at his forehead with a handkerchief, but

the stains only became more numerous.

Partway home, he stopped walking. He couldn't see Kobayakawa anymore. He gazed up at the sky, finally realizing that. He expected the moon to be clear, but for some reason it looked hazy.

"That's strange." He wiped at the corners of his eyes and realized for the first time why that was. Sawa was crying.

Sawa knelt down on the asphalt, huddled up, and cried. There weren't any houses nearby; nobody would be bothered by his tears.

Sawa liked Kobayakawa. He loved him. Maybe it was nothing more than a childhood romance. But even so, a child loves with a naïve sincerity.

Sawa's heart was empty. He had devoted everything to Kobayakawa; there was nothing left now.

But he was glad to have nothing. He had loved someone enough to lose everything, and nothing could make him happier than that.

"Uzuki..."

Uzuki, Uzuki, Uzuki. Sawa said his name over and over and over again, trying to drive out the desire to ever say his name again. Kobayakawa may have considered what he did a betrayal, but it was the only thing Sawa could have done.

That was the end of the summer of his senior year. And the eight years that had passed since breaking up with Kobayakawa had gone by in the blink of an eye.

Chapter Seven

“Your phone’s ringing.”

Sawa noticed the sound when a coworker pointed it out to him. Several of them had gone out to a bar after work.

“Oh, thanks. I’m totally out of it.”

Actually, it wasn’t a call: Sawa had received a message. He glanced casually at the name, and a shudder ran through his body. Noticing Sawa’s prolonged silence, his coworker called out to him. “Got some urgent business, eh?”

“No, I think it’s fine.”

He put his phone back in his pocket and returned to the conversation. But five minutes later his phone chimed again, announcing the arrival of another message.

“Sorry. Just a second.”

Sawa checked the screen hurriedly. He tried once again to pretend that he hadn’t seen it, but his heart began beating faster after reading the message.

“What’s up, Sawa?”

“Sorry. I need to cut out early.”

“What? But we’ve barely started!” a junior employee complained from the seat across from Sawa.

“I’ll make up for it next time. I’m really sorry.”

Feeling guilty, Sawa left a bit of money, picked up his jacket and shoes, and left the bar. He searched out a

taxi on the street and hurriedly climbed into one.

"Where to, sir?"

He gave the driver the name of a hotel in Shinjuku.

"Please get me there as soon as possible."

Sawa drew a deep breath. The messages were from Kobayakawa. The first one had read: "I'm in Shinjuku. Come now."

He'd ignored it since it had been so arrogantly dismissive of what he was doing. But Sawa had had no choice but to acknowledge the message that came next: "Remember what I can do to you."

It was better, he supposed, that it had come by text message, at least, instead of over the phone.

The taxi finally pulled up in front of the hotel. Sawa paid quickly and got into the elevator to go to the front desk.

"What room is Mister Kobayakawa staying in?"

"Just a moment. Would you please give me your name?"

"Sawa."

The well-trained staff contacted Kobayakawa's room immediately. It was the same room as last time, on the forty-fifth floor. Turning down the offer of an escort, Sawa headed up to the room alone.

Inside the climbing elevator, Sawa asked himself how he had gotten himself into a position like this. If he ignored the call, something was going to happen—some part of him realized that. But the memory of the pictures grazed his heart. The things Kobayakawa had said resurfaced in his mind.

You betrayed me once.

Kobayakawa hadn't forgotten the past. But neither had Sawa. He hadn't betrayed Kobayakawa because he wanted to. That excuse wouldn't be good enough for Kobayakawa, but Sawa couldn't tell him why he had done it. Kobayakawa probably wasn't looking for any explanations anymore anyway.

Sawa's feelings for Kobayakawa eight years ago reawakened alongside his guilt in the depths of his heart. The two fused into a new emotion that ruled his heart.

His spine tingled at the reawakening memories of their vicious sex. There had been no emotions during it. He knew he did it only to feed off of the pleasure, but he couldn't stop chasing Kobayakawa.

Hiding this complicated self-pity away in his heart, Sawa got off the elevator and walked toward Kobayakawa's room.

He rang the bell and the door opened immediately. "You're late."

Kobayakawa was wearing slim-cut black slacks with his shirt, which was open at the chest. His bangs covered his forehead. He narrowed his eyes unpleasantly, holding a cigarette in his mouth.

"Get in here." He cast an obscene gaze over Sawa, as if appraising him, then ordered him into the room in an overbearing tone. "You want something to drink? There's room service if you haven't eaten."

Piles of papers and clothes were scattered around the room. Sawa glanced at the bag on the bed and Kobayakawa cut in. "Sorry it's such a mess."

"Have you been staying here ever since last time?"

"Where else would I be? You expect me to go home?"

Opening the refrigerator, Kobayakawa took out some beer cans and tossed one to Sawa.

"What—?"

"If you're thinking about my dad's place, that's not my home. Ever since I came back here in high school, I've been staying at a condo in Nishi-Azabu. But when I've got work, I come here. This hotel is pretty much my second home." Kobayakawa cracked open his can and gulped his beer down.

The first time Sawa had searched for Kobayakawa's house was after they'd separated. He had found the Kanto Regional Koryu Alliance.

Since it was a gang, it would run businesses as a front, probably either managing or supervising adult entertainment places and bars. Of course, what the group did wasn't made public and Sawa couldn't begin to guess what it might be, but he was relieved that it wasn't as bloody as he had imagined.

Whenever family rivalries made the news, Sawa's heart ached with his fear at hearing the names of the dead. He hadn't broken up with Kobayakawa so that he could die. It was so that he would remain boldly, fiercely alive.

And now that he had run into him again, it seemed that Kobayakawa had built a strong position within the Koryu Alliance and was keeping busy as the director of his companies. He'd gleaned that much from their first get-together at the bar. Sawa couldn't deny how glad he had been to find Kobayakawa alive and well. Nor could

he deny the fact that he had never once been able to forget about him since leaving him. But...

"If you call me out without warning on weeknights, this is going to be a problem," Sawa said without looking at Kobayakawa.

"Yeah?" Kobayakawa stared at Sawa in irritated amazement. He stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray and turned around to look at Sawa. "Did I inconvenience you?"

"I was with my coworkers. You can do whatever you want on the weekends, but if you call me out like this without any warning, they're going to get suspicious and—"

Sawa couldn't finish. Something cold was raining down on his head.

"I guess you don't understand our arrangement."

Drops of the stuff fell from Sawa's bangs and onto his lips. The bittersweet carbonated taste spreading through his mouth told him that Kobayakawa had poured beer over his head.

"Kobayakawa—"

"Do you remember what I told you last time?"

He dropped the empty can on the carpet and crushed it firmly beneath his foot. It made a harsh crunching noise, and Sawa saw an image of his own heart overlaid on the deformed aluminum can.

"You're my bitch."

"Now just a—" Sawa gulped at the humiliating words.

"What? You have something to say?"

The crushed can floated through Sawa's mind.

"I didn't come see you last time intending to sleep with you." Even as he said it, a part of Sawa was laughing at the lie.

"So?"

"So I want today to be the last time you call me out like this."

"You think you're in a position to demand that?" Kobayakawa tossed a brown envelope he'd left on the bed at Sawa.

"What's this?"

"See for yourself."

His cold voice filled Sawa with terror as kneeled on the ground to pick up the envelope. When he peeked inside, his spine went cold. As soon as he recognized what was inside, he shut the envelope without any further investigation.

"You don't want to look at them?" Kobayakawa's voice was mocking. He must have known from the very beginning how Sawa would react when he came here today. "If you're not going to look, I'll show you."

Kobayakawa took some photos from another envelope on the bed and threw them into the air. They fluttered back down to fall on the carpet, showing indiscretions that Sawa would rather not see.

"They came out good, don't you think? Look how happy you are getting plugged by me. Oh, and see how hard you are when I'm touching you?" Kobayakawa laughed as Sawa scrambled around to pick up the photos and tear them up. "You know it doesn't matter if you destroy them, right? I can make as many copies as I want with the negatives. You want me to scan them and

e-mail them to your office?"

"Are you serious?"

"Of course. I'm always serious." Kobayakawa ground one of the photos under his foot. "You don't have a choice. If you didn't want to do it, you should have fought back when I was taking the pictures."

Kobayakawa unfastened his belt buckle and pulled it off. "You're my bitch, and I'm going to make you understand that."

He undid his buttons and pulled his member out.

"There. You know what you have to do."

Kobayakawa jerked his chin at him. *Come here*, it said.

Sawa felt a sudden dryness in his mouth, and a cold sweat trailed down his back. If he obeyed Kobayakawa now, there would be no going back ever again. But if he resisted, he wouldn't be able to pretend that nothing had happened.

He couldn't tell Kobayakawa that he loved him; not again. They could never go back to the past, and he could never forget Kobayakawa, so Sawa had no choice but to obey.

He gulped.

"You're not bad at this."

Kobayakawa stared into Sawa's face, his fist in Sawa's hair as he loudly sucked on him.

"Is this how women always go down on you?"

His breathing grew rough, but Kobayakawa's eyes were cold. He was warm in Sawa's mouth.

"Ahh—mmph."

"That's enough, Sawa. Now strip," Kobayakawa spat cruelly, pulling Sawa's hair and yanking him away from him. Leaving his pants on, he plopped down on the edge of the bed.

Sawa couldn't refuse the order. He felt Kobayakawa's gaze licking over him like a slimy tongue as he loosened his tie and undid his shirt buttons one by one.

He was being watched—it was so embarrassing, just like in high school, and then again the other day. But now, in control of his reason and stripped of his own will, there was an entirely different implication in the act.

Sawa unfastened the buckle of his belt and pulled it off, then tossed aside his pants and underwear in one motion.

"Come here."

Kobayakawa looked satisfied as he motioned Sawa over, who had nothing left to hide his body. Battling a violent feeling of humiliation, Sawa walked over to stand before Kobayakawa.

"Get down on all fours on the bed."

Sawa stared at him.

"You can't refuse my orders."

Kobayakawa was raping Sawa psychologically with this coercion and intimidation. It was only natural that Sawa had no pride. But Kobayakawa wouldn't allow even a trace of it to remain.

When he thought about the things he had done to Kobayakawa, Sawa accepted it as inevitable. But despite

his resignation, he still felt doubt.

Sawa had chosen this path. And since it wasn't possible to return to the past, he thought he had no choice but to build a new relationship with Kobayakawa. That much was true.

But Kobayakawa had had sex with countless men and women. Even without including Sawa, his betrayer, there must have been a great many people who had been with Kobayakawa. Did he want to humiliate all of them with these traps, with this coercion to obey?

Did Kobayakawa hate Sawa so much that he still couldn't forgive him after eight years?

Sawa walked hesitantly to the edge of the bed and climbed up. Then, as Kobayakawa had instructed him, he got on his hands and knees.

"That's a nice view, Sawa."

Kobayakawa stood behind him. "Do you remember holding me inside you?"

He shoved his finger inside without any warning.

"Ahh!"

"You're hardly relaxed at all. But you still sucked my finger right in. You're a whore. You acted like it hurt before. You know what's going to happen to you, right?" Kobayakawa's long finger explored Sawa's inner walls, scratching a nail over his sensitive spots.

"Nngh!"

"Just wait. I'm going to have fun with you." Kobayakawa's finger disappeared suddenly, only to be replaced by something warm and soft pressing against him.

"Kobayakawa—"

Sawa tried to turn around to look at him, but Kobayakawa pinned his hips in place and brought his face against them. His hot tongue was like a living creature as it licked over him. Pushing apart his folds of flesh, Kobayakawa used the tip of his tongue skillfully and persistently—Sawa's body shook under the force of a sensation his body had never felt before.

His arms collapsed under him and, no longer able to hold himself up, his head fell against the sheets.

"Ah! N—no!"

"You don't mean that, do you? Look at how wet you are for me. I guess it's only natural that you want me to hurry up and stick it in you."

Kobayakawa licked at him, deliberately making a loud lapping noise. He pulled Sawa open with a finger and pushed the tip of his tongue inside when Sawa suddenly clamped down tightly.

"See?" Kobayakawa said derisively, sneering at Sawa. Sawa was annoyed by his spitefulness, but he was annoyed also at his own past, which had made it possible for the man to do so much to him.

This is my penance for past sins, Toya thought languidly as the thing that always drove him mad finally pushed inside his body and filled him.

Even when summer gave way to autumn, their relationship never changed. More than a month later, Sawa was still Kobayakawa's "bitch."

The springs of the king size bed squeaked horribly. Clinging desperately to the bouncing sheets, Sawa

struggled with all his might to contain the rapture spreading from his crotch through his entire body.

Bent in half, his legs high in the air, Sawa was being penetrated from above, Kobayakawa's manhood buried deep inside his body.

"Ah—nngh," Sawa panted.

Kobayakawa's hips pounded a vicious rhythm, and a cry Sawa couldn't hold back escaped his lips. He couldn't think about what an obscene expression he wore, begging for his pleasure. Just the earnest rubbing inside him gave rise to an exquisite pleasure that his entire body hungered for.

"Nngh. Jesus, you're tight. Like always," Kobayakawa panted roughly, pulling open the narrow place that joined them with a finger.

"Ahh!"

"Then don't squeeze so hard. You always do that. I can tell you like it." With these brutal words, Kobayakawa pounded into Sawa's disjointed body. When he had forced fluid to swell up on Sawa, Kobayakawa jerked on Sawa's member, which didn't cower from his touch.

"Ah—nngh!"

The reaction of Sawa's body made him clamp down tightly once again on the place where he held Kobayakawa.

"You just won't stop, will you? Man. You already came once— isn't that enough? I'm going to shove myself all the way inside you, then."

Sawa's legs fell open, and Kobayakawa yanked himself suddenly back to the entrance.

"Aagh!"

"There. Now...shut up."

He pulled open the narrow inner walls once again and his hard organ went all the way in. Sawa gasped painfully.

The stimulation made Sawa push hard against the object inside him. A lustful voice welled out of him and fluid dripped from him, though his crotch hadn't yet been touched.

"Do you like it there? I'll rub it harder."

Kobayakawa dug at the spot that had made Sawa cry out, a smile on his face. Slightly delirious with his impatience, Sawa felt as if his body would break apart. This intense pleasure was raining over him, but his heart had been left behind.

Even now he loved Kobayakawa. But Kobayakawa held nothing but contempt for him.

"No—nngh, uh—ahh!"

At the mercy of Kobayakawa's intricate movements, meaningless groans escaped Sawa's open mouth. Inside his mind, as it slipped toward rapturous oblivion, he knew the next climax would be coming soon. Blind to his own shame, Sawa began to rock his own hips, pressing against Kobayakawa, pushing the penetration deeper.

Then the moment came—his deep penetration transformed into a climax—just as the cell phone beside his head rang. For a moment, they both stopped moving.

Kobayakawa ignored the phone and continued attacking Sawa.

But the person calling was persistent. As soon as the ringing stopped, they called back. When this had repeated itself several times, Kobayakawa finally lost his patience. In order for Kobayakawa to reach the phone beside the table, he had to bend far across Sawa, and his position inside Sawa's body shifted.

"Nngh!"

"Okay, I'm here. What do you want?"

The voice that responded sounded enraged.

"Yeah? Yeah, okay. Got it," Kobayakawa replied arrogantly, tossing the phone onto the bed.

"Kobayakawa—"

"Sorry about that. I'll get you back to the peak soon."

Before Sawa could ask what the call was about, Kobayakawa's body fell forward, and he pressed a kiss against Sawa's lips.

Sawa found the position nearly impossible, but he stretched his tongue out and tangled it with Kobayakawa's. He sucked in the saliva that welled up, not letting a single drop fall.

Sawa's member, forgotten in the middle of its ecstasy, regained its strength. Kobayakawa wrapped his fingers around it and handled it with nimble movements. It trembled, regaining its passion quickly.

"Ah—nngh! Mm!"

"Do you like it, Sawa?"

"Y—yeah. It's really—really good!"

The sweet pleasure swept away Sawa's rational mind.

"Then come."

Pressed onward, Sawa's reason was left far behind. Somewhere deep in his body, Kobayakawa's passion exploded. Sawa ejaculated soon after. He tightened the muscles behind him with the shock of it, and Kobayakawa twitched inside him, squeezing out every last drop of sweet release.

But when the doorbell rang, Kobayakawa easily yanked himself out of Sawa without a second thought. Sawa squeezed down quickly, but it was too late.

"Aggh!"

The fluid that had been released inside him pooled on his thigh.

Sawa still yearned for something more, but Kobayakawa paid no attention to him. He jumped up from the bed and, wrapping a bathrobe around him, went to the door.

"Perfect timing."

Maybe one of the hotel staff had come. Lying on the bed, his body open, the lingering echoes of his pleasure still ringing through him, Sawa was gazing up at the ceiling when he heard the door close.

Normally, the two would now take a shower together, washing each other's bodies in the unquenched flames of passion, bringing on the next round.

Usually Sawa had work the next day, and he would return home sleep-deprived only to change clothes and head back to work. He surprised himself with how much stamina he seemed to have, but Kobayakawa was even tougher than him.

After sex, even if Sawa collapsed into near unconsciousness, Kobayakawa would pick himself up

and sit at his desk. He was constantly on the phone, and it wasn't unusual for him to interrupt the act itself if he got a phone call in the middle of it.

"...which we wanted to inform you about," he heard a familiar voice say.

Sawa sat up in surprise at the unexpected sound. Kobayakawa came back into the room with Iwatsuki behind him. Sawa recalled that he was still completely naked and he hurried to burrow into the crumpled sheets, drawing them up over the top of his head.

Of course, as Kobayakawa's aide, Iwatsuki had to know that the two had gotten back together. But given the events of eight years before, Sawa felt too embarrassed to face him.

Kobayakawa was true to form. Sawa wondered what he was thinking inviting someone into the room without cleaning up at all after their affair.

"I get it already. You don't have to keep telling me. God you're pushy."

"I apologize," Iwatsuki said as he took mourning clothes out of a bag. He spread them out on the edge of the bed and began unbuttoning the jacket. Kobayakawa took off his bathrobe, and Iwatsuki drew the sleeves of a dry cleaned shirt over his arms.

"I've hired a car to take you to the funeral home. After the wake, I communicated to you that there was something I wished to discuss with you, so I have taken seats at the Sen no Rikyu tea house in Akasaka."

Sawa found Iwatsuki's language incongruous.

"Sen no Rikyu? It's been awhile since I saw the hostess there. Is she still doing it with dad?"

"I am not privileged with the details. But I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to see you, Master Uzuki, and speak with you about this."

Iwatsuki had always talked to Kobayakawa with extreme humility. But something in the fine points of his words and behavior had communicated the closeness between the two despite the difference in their social levels.

But it was different now.

Kobayakawa allowed Iwatsuki to dress him as a matter of course, and Iwatsuki did it, also as a matter of course. But Sawa didn't pick up on any of the affection that he used to sense between them. It seemed instead like two strangers interacting.

"Sawa," Kobayakawa called to the man curled up in his bed, as if he had just remembered that he was still there. Sawa pulled back the sheets and stuck his head out slightly. Kobayakawa was already dressed in his funeral clothes. The sight of him made Sawa's loins ache.

Kobayakawa had always radiated masculinity, and it exuded from him even in those clothes. But in his standard black suit, a necktie tied neatly under his collar, he looked almost beyond sex.

"I'm going to a wake. I don't know what time I'll be back tomorrow. You can go home whenever you want to."

"Huh?"

"Don't look like an abandoned puppy. You're making it hard to leave."

"I—I'm not—"

An abandoned puppy—Sawa couldn't finish his



denial. Kobayakawa came to Sawa's pillow side and ripped the sheets away from him. He thrust his hand behind Sawa's neck and forced a kiss against his lips, as if he were feeding off of him. The kiss was more lustful and tender than usual. Sawa's eyes widened in surprise, and Kobayakawa pushed deeper, as if he had suddenly become aware of something.

He nestled his own lips inside Sawa's half-open mouth and caressed the roof of his mouth in sticky confusion. As soon as Sawa began to react, Kobayakawa pulled away.

He slowly licked his lips and grinned. "Don't worry. I'll be back soon to make you scream again."

Sawa was shocked by the lewd movement of his tongue and his overconfident words, but Sawa couldn't say anything in response.

"Iwatsuki." Kobayakawa's voice was loud as he called Iwatsuki, who was standing behind him.

"Yes, sir."

"Can you take care of the rest?"

"Certainly, sir. I will see you there." Iwatsuki bowed with perfect ease to his young master, and escorted him out of the room.

Sawa waited until he heard the door slam shut, then leapt out of the bed. Clothes were strewn around on the floor, evidence of last night's indiscretions. He hurried to pick them up and went into the bathroom.

Directly across from him as he entered was a half-length mirror that showed Sawa's reflection.

Sawa felt strangely detached from his image, the naked body of an adult man covered with the marks of

his fierce love affair.

Eight years before, Sawa had slept with Kobayakawa for the first time. He had stayed thin, and though his frame was undeniably masculine, nowhere did he have the same manly charm that Kobayakawa had. But still, compared to what Sawa was now, his inexperienced youth had probably given him a freshness that Sawa had never recognized himself.

But what did he have now?

He still had a baby face, but it wasn't remarkable for a twenty-six year-old. He had matured well, but it wasn't anything to brag about.

Why did a mediocre body like his excite Kobayakawa so much? Why did they sleep together constantly, with barely enough time to take a breath?

Resting his hands on the marble counter, Sawa examined his own face.

"Maybe I really did look like a puppy..."

He stared at himself intently, but he saw nothing. He decided that Kobayakawa must have seen something in him that Sawa couldn't.

"Are you inside, Mister Sawa?"

A knock came at the door behind him, and Iwatsuki's voice interrupted his thoughts. Sawa thought he had left. He spun around to face the door.

"Uh, yes. I'm changing," he said, hurriedly pulling on his pants.

Iwatsuki's voice hadn't changed at all in the last eight years: it was still lifeless and uninflected. That was what made it sound so chilling. No matter how often Sawa heard it, he never became immune to its effect.

"I'm going to go home soon, so no need to worry about me..."

"Could I beg a moment of your time when you are finished dressing?" Iwatsuki asked, ignoring Sawa.

It's finally come—ever since he had met Kobayakawa again, Sawa had imagined that this would happen. The memories of eight years ago came to life again in his mind.

Was Iwatsuki going to rub reality in Sawa's face again, like last time? Was he going to tell Sawa that he was living in a dream world?

He felt a chill run down his spine as he tightened his necktie with trembling hands.

"Sure," he agreed.

When Sawa opened the door, the powerful aroma of coffee came to him.

Iwatsuki was preparing coffee on the dining table.

"Do you take milk or sugar?"

"Just milk, thank you..." Sawa was surprised at this development, which was not exactly what he had imagined.

"Please, have a seat."

Sawa sat in the place Iwatsuki indicated, but he couldn't relax. For Sawa, Iwatsuki was the same man he had been eight years ago.

"You seem not to like me."

"No, it's not—"

Sawa hurried to deny Iwatsuki's observation, which seemed to have pierced straight into his heart. But

Sawa swallowed the rest of his words at the sight of the expression on Iwatsuki's face.

"When I look into your face, it seems as if nothing at all has changed in these past eight years. But when I see your suit, I am strongly aware of the passage of time."

"What was it you wanted to talk about?" Sawa asked, pressing his hands against his knees. He wasn't about to spend his time reminiscing with this guy. "Are you going to tell me to stay away from Kobayakawa again? Or did you come to tell me to break up with him?"

Sawa's chest tightened at the self-pity in his voice.

After a brief pause, Iwatsuki answered, his voice as deep as ever. "And if I did? Could you manage to stay away from him?"

It sank in slowly in the depths of Sawa's heart. Sawa held his breath for a moment and clenched his hands on top of his knees. It was only natural that since their reunion, Sawa had wanted to see Kobayakawa every day. The desire was so strong that he wondered how he had survived their time apart.

Of course Sawa wasn't blind to the fact that Kobayakawa was sleeping with him without affection. He felt the hollowness of that. But it didn't matter, because he wanted so deeply to see him.

It was true that he hesitated when Kobayakawa called him out to satisfy his lust. But it allowed him to see Kobayakawa, and that couldn't help but make Sawa happy.

But if for some reason Sawa couldn't see

Kobayakawa anymore—just thinking about it sent a chill down his spine. He wouldn't be able to bear being torn away from him again without a concrete reason.

Kobayakawa's declaration that Sawa's body belonged to him was, for Sawa, the best excuse imaginable to keep seeing Kobayakawa.

"Eight years ago...."

Sawa looked up in surprise. Why was Iwatsuki deliberately touching on the taboo subject of the past?

"Have you heard what happened after you left Master Uzuki?"

"No...."

When they'd first gotten back together, they had talked about their classmates. They had never once, in all the time since then, talked about themselves.

"He did quite reckless things. Presumably to drive from his mind the loneliness and emptiness he felt at not being able to see you. He was utterly composed on the surface, but I believe that he was experiencing unimaginable anger. He went on for many years throwing himself into trouble, as if he had a death wish."

Sawa remembered the reports of gang warfare on TV and he shuddered. "Was he hurt?"

"A certain amount of injury was only to be expected. But he never suffered anything life-threatening, no. That was because his subordinates protected him, even at the cost of their own lives."

Sawa believed that people could have lost their lives at that time.

"I asked Master Uzuki only once why he was doing such reckless things. I told him the truth, hoping that it

would help him to put himself back together. I told him that what had happened had been my idea. And he told me that he knew."

Kobayakawa had known all along.

"In the end, Master Uzuki was upset by the fact that you needed to distance yourself from him in order to protect yourself. He seemed to believe that he needed to become his own man, and strong. And then, if he was ever able to see you again, perhaps..."

Sawa waited for him to continue. Iwatsuki saw Sawa's expression and his eyes became gentle. Sawa's eyes widened at this smile, which he never would have imagined seeing eight years ago. Iwatsuki caught himself and quickly gave a sardonic chuckle, pushing the bridge of his glasses back.

"I want to tell you right now that I do not consider my decision to have been a mistake. I believe it was the correct choice."

"Mister Iwatsuki..."

"And I see great importance in the fact that Master Uzuki himself realized that. In fact, it is because the induction ceremony proceeded smoothly that Master Uzuki is who he is today. That the Koryu alliance is what it is today. At the time, Master Uzuki was more important to the Alliance than his own happiness was to him. My highest priority was to protect him, required by my debt to Kobayakawa for fostering me. Once it was over, people recognized Master Uzuki's position as the heir to our powerful family."

Whatever else Sawa could say about him, Iwatsuki had not tried to sever Sawa and Kobayakawa's

relationship without good reason. Now that he was an adult, he understood that.

But at the time, Sawa and Kobayakawa had only been able to think about themselves. They were convinced that they needed to hold onto the happiness that was right in front of them. They couldn't imagine that any greater happiness might exist. They had never thought that their happiness would have consequences or that it might make someone else unhappy.

But even if they had managed to stand against all the people there, they could never have been happy. Iwatsuki had made himself the bad guy, and preserved the balance.

Sawa was no longer bitter about the choice Iwatsuki had made. Maybe Kobayakawa wasn't, either. On the contrary, now that they had been brought back together like this, Sawa was grateful.

"But neither you nor Master Uzuki are children who require a guardian any longer. Since the induction ceremony was completed, Master Uzuki has ceased to be a child I must protect and is instead a master I must serve. You should drink your coffee. It's getting cold."

"Oh, thank you."

Sawa tasted the coffee that Iwatsuki had brewed. A faintly bitter taste spread through his mouth, and he felt his body waking up. But it wasn't due solely to the bitterness of the coffee; the bitterness of reality also contributed.

"I believe you understand to some extent the sort of life that Master Uzuki leads."

Sawa gazed down at the trembling surface of the

coffee inside his cup.

He didn't have enough information to agree, but he wasn't so ignorant that he would try to deny it. He understood at least how the average citizen perceived them—that is, the yakuza organizations.

"Therefore, if you decide of your own will to be with Master Uzuki, I have no intention of stopping you. But if you are not with him willingly, I will obey Master Uzuki's orders without question."

Just like before, Iwatsuki had come to make Sawa face reality, but this time there was nothing to distinguish that reality from a dream.

Chapter Eight

“Hey, Sawa!”

When Sawa got back to the office on Friday after finishing his rounds, Kashima called out to him, renewing his efforts despite his repeated failures. After introducing Sawa to Fukaya, Kashima had made every possible excuse to play the matchmaker and introduce him to girls.

Sawa had some suspicions about why Kashima was devoting so much energy to him. There had been talk recently that Sawa would be promoted, meaning that the role currently assigned to Kashima would transfer to Sawa, in name as well as reality. There were some who said the move was premature considering his age, but given Sawa's recent performance record and the undeniable trend in Kashima's, the decision was one they would have to make sooner or later.

Perhaps sensing that he was in danger, Kashima was desperately trying to ingratiate himself to Sawa. Sawa understood how he felt, but it would only cause problems if he mentioned it openly. So instead, Sawa politely turned down all of Kashima's invitations. But no matter how often he refused, Kashima always came up with something new.

Sawa considered himself a patient guy, but they were fast approaching his limit all the same. And on top

of it all, he'd been in a bad mood since morning. Things could get bad if Kashima got on his nerves.

"I think it's about time you settled down," Kashima said in Sawa's general direction in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. They all pretended not to have heard, but Sawa knew they were all listening in.

So Sawa responded with a smile, so everyone could hear. "Thank you for your concern. But I've already got my sights set on someone. I'm not sure how things will develop, but I would say you don't need to worry about me."

Kashima's eyes widened. And he wasn't the only one in the office to murmur in surprise. "Really?"

Sawa threw a quick glance at him and smiled, then turned to face Kashima.

"Is that so? Do I know her?"

Sawa smiled as he replied, "That's a secret."

Why did he have to talk to this man about the person he cared about? He hadn't even clearly told the person himself how he felt yet.

"So, I'm afraid I won't be able to accept invitations to drink except in public places. I hope you understand."

At least his preferences had been communicated to everyone now, not just Kashima. After a few days, no one would hit on him anymore.

"Oh man. Why am I wasting my time with this?" Sawa muttered heartlessly, glancing at his watch.

Ever since Kobayakawa had left for the funeral that day, he hadn't heard from him. He had found out on the news that night whose funeral Kobayakawa

was attending: the man who was called the right arm of the Koryu Alliance's leader, probably referring to Kobayakawa's father. He had been killed by a member of a rival family.

Sawa could easily imagine that Kobayakawa's family therefore had a lot to take care of. He thought that as more time passed, Kobayakawa would contact him eventually.

But a week passed, and Sawa began to worry about the lack of news. Of course the man who had killed the leader's right hand man might be trying to kill the leader himself, but he might go after Kobayakawa, the leader's son, too.

There was nothing on the news, but it was possible it was being covered up.

After they were reunited, Sawa's relationship with Kobayakawa was ostensibly based on the threat of blackmail to perform as his sexual slave. Sawa felt like it would be violating some unwritten agreement if he tried to contact Kobayakawa any time other than when he summoned him.

But since their relationship had, after all, been defined by Kobayakawa without concern for what Sawa wanted, the real situation wasn't quite so simple. Sawa was no longer going to see Kobayakawa because he had been summoned. He went because he wanted to see Kobayakawa.

Sawa had wanted to repay his past crimes with the blackmail photos, so for him there could be no better terms of repayment than this. His mind and his rationality had fought it, but somewhere deeper he was

flooded by a desire to seek Kobayakawa out.

Kobayakawa had taken Sawa back in, even after he knew from Iwatsuki's explanation that Sawa had betrayed him for no reason. And Sawa wanted to be with him now. His passion of eight years before continued now exactly as it had then.

He tried to figure out how Kobayakawa felt about him. Kobayakawa was strangely interested in putting on a strong show to make Sawa understand that the relationship was purely physical, but Sawa couldn't help but feel that the tenderness he'd glimpsed for only a brief moment had revealed Kobayakawa's true feelings.

What had Kobayakawa thought about all of them in high school, about how they all obeyed the adults without ever saying how they truly felt? Sawa had wanted to ask him, but he never had.

He called the cell phone number Kobayakawa had given him all day, but it seemed to be turned off, since Sawa never got through. He even tried calling the hotel in Shinjuku, but they said Kobayakawa hadn't been back since that last night.

So Sawa decided to go to the bar in Kabuki-cho where he had first run into Kobayakawa. The place was under the protection of the Koryu Alliance, so he might come by to check on it that night. Sawa pinned his hopes on that fragile idea.

Around nine Friday night in Kabuki-cho, the streets were jammed with people.

This was the biggest entertainment district in Asia,

where huge numbers of people gathered regardless of race or age, from the precocious elementary school students to the seventy- and eighty-year-old geezers.

Sawa felt as if he would be lost in the excited crowds of people as he searched for the club. And since he didn't clearly remember where it was, he had to stop and check the name of every place that looked even slightly familiar.

"Come right in, sir. It's still early and prices are still low!"

"You're not coming?"

Ignoring the pitches of the front-men and hostesses, Sawa searched for Kobayakawa's bar.

"Where was it?"

As Sawa was growing more and more harried, someone grabbed his arm. "Hey. I wanted to thank you for before."

Sawa didn't recognize the man standing in front of him. He looked at him dubiously.

"You don't remember me? How about if I told you your boss really screwed up my night?"

"Oh yeah."

Sawa finally remembered. This was the man who had accused Kashima of hitting him when Kashima had taken Sawa out that night. The guy looked like nothing so much as a cheesy pimp, his expression and bearing just oozing insignificance.

"Thanks to you jokers, the Koryu Alliance has had their eye on me ever since. It's really cramping my style."

The man pulled on Sawa's arm and stuck his face

close to Sawa's. He smelled like a stale ashtray.

"So what?" Sawa replied curtly. Normally, he would have tried to say something to avoid aggravating the guy any further, but he didn't have time for that right now. Kobayakawa might be walking out of that club as they spoke.

Sawa couldn't stand to miss this one in a million chance, even if it was a long shot. He fought back his impatience and glared at the man.

"You're asking me 'so what'?" Even when the man threatened him, Sawa couldn't see past his how lowly he was.

There were no inherent ranks dividing people. How wrong, then, was the pursuit of rank in an authoritarian gang? Sawa didn't agree with it, but still he couldn't help feeling that Kobayakawa was superior to this man.

He didn't actually know what Kobayakawa did in the gang. But since he bossed around Iwatsuki as if it was his birthright, even though Iwatsuki was older, and still commanded the man's absolute loyalty, Sawa figured that his position wasn't half bad.

Neither were his looks. No matter what Kobayakawa wore, he was handsome. His powerful eyes and their obvious conviction still brought Sawa to his knees.

"Hey, you're pretty sexy for a guy."

The man was leaning close to Sawa's face, disgustingly flicking his tongue over the vulgar smile on his lips.

"I was thinking about paying you back a little pain for what happened, but maybe I should show you a good

time instead? I know you'd love it if I pounded you from the back."

His tarry tongue crawled over Sawa's cheek, and Sawa felt an unspeakable loathing run through him.

"Hey, you liked that, didn't you?"

"Get out of my face!" Sawa struck out at the man's cheek.

This was bad. Why had he been attacked by such a disgusting man? He wiped roughly at his slimy cheek. The sticky sensation made Sawa feel like he might be sick.

"What the hell are you doing?"

What a short-sighted guy. He reached out again to grab hold of Sawa, and Sawa knocked his hand away with all his strength.

"Watch it! You don't want to know what I'll do to you if you fight back."

Sawa wasn't afraid at all. "You said the Koryu Alliance had their eye on you, right?"

"Yeah, and? Why are you blabbering about them when I'm trying to have some fun with you? What do they have to do with anything?"

"What would you do if I told you, 'a lot'?" Sawa challenged him, his voice rising from the pit of his stomach.

"Huh? You think I'm going to believe a bluff that obvious?"

"Unfortunately, it's not a bluff, my man."

Before Sawa could answer, he heard a familiar voice from behind him, and a tingle ran down his spine. He started to spin around, but even before he did, a hand

was on his shoulder, turning him around to face the person behind him.

The smell of tobacco tickled his nostrils. He realized that a crowd had gathered around them.

"Kobayakawa—"

"Ack."

Sawa and the man both realized who it was at roughly the same time.

What amazing timing he had.

Kobayakawa was dressed in a black double-breasted suit, a smirk twisting the corner of his mouth as he stared at the man. He was the epitome of a man living in the shadows. His intoxicating tenderness spread through the quarter. Once someone had tasted it, they could never escape it ever again.

"Hey, man."

Even in Kobayakawa's polished smile, Sawa could feel the threat. The man quickly stood up straighter.

"It looked like you were trying to pick a fight with this guy. You mind telling me why?"

"Oh, it wasn't—you know, nothing important."

"Maybe I misheard, but I thought you said something about pounding this guy from behind. Were you serious?"

"No, of—of course I wasn't. How could I be serious about that?"

His attitude was completely different now. He was hypersensitive to Kobayakawa's every move, and in the end the man fell to his knees and began groveling. There was a clearly ranked relationship at work between them.

For Kobayakawa, making a man like this grovel before him was child's play. He was a scary guy. Sawa had never seen the true face of Kobayakawa as he lived in this world.

"Oh. You weren't serious? I guess I'm losing my hearing."

Kobayakawa's persistently calm voice unhinged the man more and more.

"No, that's not what I—"

"Oh. So I'm not losing my hearing?" He had him. Kobayakawa grinned. "So then you really were talking about pounding this guy from behind."

Never losing his smile, Kobayakawa stuck his hands into the pockets of his suit. He took a leisurely step forward, crushing the man's hand against the pavement under his shoe, never hesitating.

"Aagh!"

The man's inarticulate scream rang out.

Bending at the waist, Kobayakawa brought his face close to the man as he murmured, "You don't seem too bright, so I'll tell you again. Try to remember it this time, okay? If I ever see your face in Kabuki-cho again, I'll tear you apart. I'm not a very nice guy. I'll tie some rocks to you and throw you into Tokyo Bay."

His lips were split in a brilliant smile. "If you don't want that to happen, then get the hell out of my sight!"

The man was completely paralyzed. All it took was a final coercive sigh, and it was over. He'd never even had a chance.

Sawa watched the man cower and flee, then turned to look up at Kobayakawa. But Kobayakawa turned his

face away, as if evading Sawa's gaze, and even removed his hand from Sawa's shoulder.

"Hey, this isn't a show! Get out of here!" He turned on the bystanders and they scattered in every direction.

"Kobayakawa—"

"Are you okay?" He was concerned, but his voice was gruff.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks to you."

"Man, what was his problem? What kind of pervert is he, trying to hit on you?" Kobayakawa hunched his shoulders and pulled away from Sawa. "I guess he's better than me, since I just said that."

Sawa gasped at the unexpected words. He reached a hand out to him, but Kobayakawa shook it off brusquely. With Kobayakawa's back turned to him, refusing to look at him, it seemed as if he were rejecting Sawa. Sawa wondered why he would do that and called out to him.

"I was worried about you. You never called."

"Worried? About me?" Kobayakawa turned ever so slightly at Sawa's words, revealing a cold smile. "Weren't you relieved? You didn't have to put up with being called out anymore." It was strange for Kobayakawa to be saying such self-pitying things.

"Did something happen?"

"Nothing special."

"I know it did. Do you think I didn't see it on the news?"

Kobayakawa stopped in his tracks at Sawa's rapid-fire response. "We still haven't caught the guy who killed our man."

"I know." That was why Sawa had been so worried

this entire time, thinking that disaster might strike Kobayakawa, too.

"So then just walk away," Kobayakawa said in a low voice, facing Sawa down.

"But why—"

"It doesn't matter why. If you watched the news, you know what's going on," Kobayakawa shouted, as if he could no longer hold himself in check. Instantly, everyone around them fell silent and all eyes turned on them once again. Kobayakawa saw what was happening and quickly put a hand to his face and turned his head to the side.

"If you're seen with me, you might get caught in the crossfire," he snapped in a pained voice. His forehead was cut by deep creases.

"Kobayakawa—"

"Even though you're just some guy I went to high school with and we only bumped into each other again by chance here in Tokyo. Even though you have no connection to my guys."

"No connection?" Pain bloomed in Sawa's heart. He felt like he had been stabbed by a dull knife, like the blood from his wound stain his chest. "You're telling me...that I have no connection?"

"None," Kobayakawa said apologetically, shoulders still hunched. He never once looked back at Sawa.

Sawa had no idea what was happening. He stared at Kobayakawa's back in disbelief. Why would he say something like that at a time like this? Anger, resentment: violent emotions took control of Sawa's

heart and mind.

"So you got everything you wanted from me, and now you're just going to write me off because I have no connection?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying." Kobayakawa replied, matching the force in Sawa's voice.

Sawa didn't care if the eyes of everyone they passed in the street were on them. But Kobayakawa seemed to.

"Come here. Why are you talking so loud in a place like this?"

Kobayakawa looked around sharply and, grabbing Sawa's arm, dragged him into a small side street. He pushed Sawa against the wall of a building and tried to threaten him. "There is no connection between the two of us. I told you I was letting you go. You should be grateful and stay the hell away from me."

Sawa saw a sneer on Kobayakawa's face by the light of a neon sign shining above them.

"Kobayakawa—"

"I feel guilty. If you want money to make up for it, I'll deposit it into your account. I'll have Iwatsuki contact you, so you can tell him anything you have to say."

"Why—?" Sawa suddenly grabbed Kobayakawa's shirt. "Why are you talking like that?" A shudder ran through his entire body.

They had been reunited and, though Sawa felt overwhelming guilt about it, he had abandoned his pride as a man and allowed Kobayakawa to sleep with him. Because he wanted to wash away his sins, and because

of the feelings he cherished for Kobayakawa in the depths of his heart.

It hadn't been easy to convince himself of these complicated emotions, but Sawa had finally decided to accept them.

"I thought I was your bitch, Kobayakawa!" His voice shook. Hadn't Kobayakawa drilled those words into him from the very beginning and then treated him accordingly? And now he was going to pretend that it had never happened?

"Just so I could blackmail you with the pictures," Kobayakawa smirked. His expression, which could also have been holding back his tears, pierced Sawa's heart. "Don't worry, I burned the pictures and the negatives."

He was telling the truth.

"I know you were using what happened eight years ago to justify what I did to you. And I knew that you regretted betraying me, so I couldn't fight it."

Kobayakawa gave him a fragile smile.

"Actually, I thought I'd forgotten about what happened eight years ago. I wanted to believe that you'd just felt sorry for me. But when I saw you again, all my rationalizations collapsed. I decided to let your kindness and innocence win me over one more time."

Kobayakawa pulled out a cigarette and put it in his mouth, but he didn't light it. Was it Sawa's imagination, or did Kobayakawa's fingers tremble slightly as he held the lighter?

"I'm not kind." Sawa rejected Kobayakawa's explanation.

Kobayakawa was the one who was kind. Sawa

never thought about anyone but himself, eight years ago and again today. He had let Kobayakawa sleep with him because he'd wanted to. He'd gone in with full knowledge the very first time he'd gone to see him.

"Sawa—"

"I'm a selfish guy—I only care about myself. I've never in my life done anything I didn't want to do."

"What do you mean?" Kobayakawa's eyes were wide. The truth might shock him. But Sawa had to tell him.

"I'm not the one who's kind. You forgave me for betraying you; you forgave Iwatsuki for putting me up to it; and now you're turning me free again. You're the one who's kind, Uzuki."

For the first time since they'd been reunited, Sawa called Kobayakawa by his first name. Just like when they were in high school together. Kobayakawa's shoulders started to shake immediately, hard enough for Sawa to see.

"I'm—I'm kind?"

Kobayakawa laughed in self-mockery.

"Aren't you? You say you love me, but in the end you know that I risk being killed if I'm with you. So you're trying to push me away from you, aren't you?"

"Sawa—"

In front of the rest of his gang, Sawa was sure Kobayakawa kept his face neutral. But with Sawa, he transformed into an honest man who could never tell a lie.

"I fell in love with you, Uzuki, eight years ago. These feelings won't go away. Even when we were

apart, I couldn't forget you. I stayed with you, knowing you would sleep with me. It was my choice. When you blackmailed me with the photos, it gave me peace. I could sleep with you without making up excuses. I could be with you forever."

Eight years ago, they had believed that they could be together because they wanted to be and never have to worry about adult problems. Would they have to be pulled apart again now? Sawa couldn't bear the idea.

"Sawa—do you understand what you're saying?"

"Yeah, I do. I'm telling you this because I know what I want."

Sawa grabbed Kobayakawa's shirt and brought their faces close together. The scent of tobacco tickled his nostrils. Before, he had thought it was the smell of an adult man, but now it was a drug that seized Sawa and refused to let him go.

"I'm with you because I want to be here. I wasn't forced into it, and no one coerced me. I tried to pretend I was doing it to make up for something, but I can't lie to myself anymore."

"Your life might depend on that."

"I know."

"I might not be able to save you."

"I know that."

Sawa knew that the man he loved was no ordinary man, and with that knowledge, he couldn't help but love him. He was prepared for anything.

"I say I know, but I can't even begin to imagine a lot of the stuff that could happen. And there are some things going on right now that might make me want to

run away. But even the idea of those things can't keep me away from you, Uzuki."

Sawa regretted what he'd done eight years ago. It was wrong to have left Kobayakawa, even if someone threatened him. He wouldn't make the same mistake again now, eight years later. He didn't believe there was any special value in his own life. But since someone wanted it, he would surrender it gladly. That was how much he loved him.

Sawa's fingers trembled. "You've given me so much already, Uzuki. Ever since we were students, you had something that I didn't. I didn't have anything."

Sawa took a deep breath. His chest hurt. Desolation and tenderness ruled his heart. He had never imagined that Kobayakawa's presence inside his heart had gotten so huge.

"You had a way to protect yourself and money. I don't plan to quit my job. If I couldn't offer you anything, I might become a burden on you or a weakness if things go bad."

"Junya—are you sure?" Kobayakawa's voice was husky, knowing that there was no lie in Sawa's words. He repeated his question quietly, as if gauging the strength of Sawa's convictions.

"I'm sure."

If Kobayakawa wanted him to swear by something, Sawa would say anything he asked. He would swear that he loved Kobayakawa.

"I can't give you anything useful. But if you say that you don't care, I have one thing that I can give you, Uzuki."

"What is it?" Kobayakawa's voice cracked ever so slightly. Sawa took tight hold of the hand that Kobayakawa hesitantly stretched out to him and brought it to his lips.

"My life—and my love," Sawa murmured. Kobayakawa caught him up in a tight embrace. He squeezed him so hard that it hurt. Sawa could hardly breathe. Afterwards, a hot whisper caressed his ear.

"That's enough."

His voice was shaking. Kobayakawa's hands, resting on Sawa's shoulders, shook as well. This strong man, who seemed stronger than any other, was laying bare for Sawa what he really was.

"All I need is love. So—" He cut himself off quickly, then continued quietly. "I want you."

At these thrilling words, all of Sawa's hesitation disappeared. As long as he was with this man, Sawa wouldn't need anything else, either. The difficulties ahead of them on this path were waiting further ahead than they believed.

Sawa didn't know the first thing about the world of the yakuza. He would probably be shocked by harshness much greater than he imagined. But he could recognize reality better than he could have as a child eight years ago. And since he couldn't leave Kobayakawa, he had no choice but to prepare himself for what lay ahead.

"Make me yours. Body and soul."

Sawa wanted that so much more than to be driven away with things unfinished. He understood Kobayakawa's reasons for worrying about him perfectly. But when he had told Sawa that they had no connection,

he'd been surprised at how much that upset him. He never wanted to feel that way again.

"Junya."

Kobayakawa stroked Sawa's face, his palm sliding over Sawa's cheek. It was warm, full of tenderness, and Sawa pressed his own hand against it. He was pulled against Kobayakawa and their lips touched.

They had kissed hundreds of times before, both in high school and since their reunion. But there was something in this one that was different from all the other kisses they had shared.

It went on and on, but it wasn't enough. Sawa wanted to touch Kobayakawa more. He wanted to consume him. They tried to consume each other's lips, all the way to their hearts.

"Mm—ahh."

They pressed their lips together desperately, barely allowing enough time to take a breath. Their tongues tangled together and they drank up the saliva that rose in their mouths, pressing even harder together.

"Junya—Junya—"

Each time Kobayakawa called his name, Sawa's body reacted. He locked his arms behind Kobayakawa's back, arms resting against the fabric of his suit jacket, and he hung from him, clawing at him frantically. Kobayakawa's hands fumbled over Sawa's body impatiently. He pulled open his jacket and pressed his hand against the flesh at the collar of his shirt.

"Uzuki—we can't...not here."

"I know," Kobayakawa's breathing was ragged as he nibbled on Sawa's upper lip.



"I know, but I can't stop..."

Kobayakawa's hips pressed against him, and Sawa knew that he was already rock hard. He wanted to get it into his body and feed his hunger for it. But he couldn't ignore the fact that he jumped every time someone walked by, though each time their kisses were renewed.

"Uzuki—please. We need to go somewhere else." Feeling desperate, Sawa pushed back Kobayakawa's muscular chest, pleading his feelings. "I can't take my time with you here."

"Damn it," Kobayakawa spat in annoyance. He roughly grabbed Sawa's arm and went back to the main street of Kabuki-cho, covering it in long strides. Sawa began to wonder where they were going when they arrived at a cabaret.

"I'm gonna take a room." Kobayakawa barged into the building, and the staff got into a commotion.

"What is this?"

"I want a room in the back. And no one comes in."

Kobayakawa glowered at the man who looked like he was in charge and, never releasing Sawa's arm, he pulled him into a small room deep in the building. It was a tiny room, smaller than a public bathroom, that stank of cigarettes, lit only by a dim orange fluorescent light.

"Sorry about the scenery." Locking the door behind him, Kobayakawa loosened his necktie. "I can't wait to take you all the way to a hotel."

The moonlight coming in through the window illuminated Kobayakawa's face, revealing the face of a man at the end of his rope. He bit down on his lip,

wrinkles gathering between his eyebrows, revealing his sincerity.

"Anywhere is fine with me." Sawa took off his jacket and loosened his necktie. "I can't wait much longer either."

"Junya—"

"Besides, I think this place is perfect for the two of us."

A sour-smelling building in Kabuki-cho, whose thin walls let Sawa hear the shouts of drunks outside and the sound of cars going by and told him that this was reality—not some perfect dream of starched sheets pulled tight over a hotel bed.

A reality that was not merely sweet and tender, but harsh. And Sawa wanted Kobayakawa anyway.

Kobayakawa's hands reached out cautiously for Sawa's cheeks. He gazed at Sawa with smiling eyes and Sawa's heart squeezed tight.

"You don't regret it—do you?" His voice was cracked. "Because I'm never letting you go again."

"The only things I regret happened eight years ago."

Sawa laid his hands on the shoulders of the man drawing closer to him. He never looked away from Kobayakawa's eyes as the man slowly closed the distance between them. Sawa watched him the entire time.

He came so close that their noses touched, but they did not immediately kiss. They only reveled in each other's scent at first. After a long moment, Kobayakawa resumed their kisses.

There was no longer any need for kissing to drive their emotions higher. It was only a ritual to break into what would come next. This was different from the sex they'd had eight years ago and the sex they'd had right after meeting again. Now, sex took place in the full awareness of their feelings and the two sides of reality.

They exchanged light kisses while Kobayakawa hastily reached for Sawa's pants. He yanked his belt out with irritation and slipped his hands under the hem of Sawa's shirt, feeling his skin before moving down to his crotch and unbuttoning his pants.

Sawa was already erect, his underwear wet and his member throbbing strongly, though nothing had been done to him yet. "Uzuki—"

"You're so wet already."

Sawa's body reacted to Kobayakawa's teasing voice. Surrendering his body to the sensation of Kobayakawa's fingers toying with him, Sawa reached out for Kobayakawa's crotch. "Who are you to talk?"

"You're right."

Sleeping with Kobayakawa in resignation or atonement had been nothing like this. Each of his touches was given to bring Sawa immediate pleasure.

Their eyes caught, so close together that their breaths intermingled, and they both sought the other's desire.

Realistically, it was enough to have only Sawa's crotch exposed. Dripping wells of fluid pressed through Sawa's resistance, moistening Kobayakawa's fingers. He reached them behind Sawa.

Kobayakawa lifted one of Sawa's legs and began

fingering him, looking into his face. It was an awkward position, meaning Sawa couldn't lose his concentration for a moment. It brought a strange stimulation to his tightly puckered flesh.

Sawa focused intently on fully appreciating each separate touch.

Kobayakawa's wet fingers searched for the rim of his entrance and slipped inside. Sawa's warm folds twitched slightly. His flesh had been forced to learn acceptance and did not resist the foreign object's progress. Sawa's body knew the object would bring it pleasure and began to clamp down tightly on it. He couldn't believe how excited he was getting.

He wanted more than a slender finger; he wanted his body to be filled with a searing passion. In all their repeated sexual encounters, this was the first time Sawa had felt such yearning.

"You want it now?" His hoarse voice tickled at Sawa's ears. He had wanted it for ages. "You want me in here?"

Kobayakawa's questions seemed to challenge him, and Sawa nodded, biting down hard on his lip. If he opened his mouth, he was afraid he might scream out indecently.

He dug his nails into Kobayakawa's arm and ground his hips, pleading the case of his lust. Sawa wanted pleasure—moving inside him, turning him into a puddle—enough pleasure that he wouldn't recognize his body as his own.

"If you want something, tell me," Kobayakawa ordered coolly, obviously not intending to give it to him

any time soon.

"Uzuki—"

"I want to hear you say it. I know I'm not the only one who wants more."

Inside him, Kobayakawa's finger bent sharply, and Sawa's body straightened at the piercing sensation.

"If you don't say it soon, I'm going to make you come like this."

Sawa surrendered quickly to Kobayakawa's cruel whisper. He didn't want to be teased, and he didn't want to tease Kobayakawa.

"I want you, Uzuki."

The pleasure crawling up his body from below made Sawa's voice shake. But now that he'd begun speaking about his feelings, he couldn't stop. This had made him realize just how much he wanted Kobayakawa.

"I want you inside me...shove it inside me!"

"Okay." Kobayakawa agreed to Sawa's wish and roughly pulled his invasive fingers out of him. He slung one of Sawa's legs over his arm and pushed his lust inside him. A crazed, scorching passion melted Sawa away from the inside out.

"Ah—nngh—" What he felt in being penetrated, having his inner walls rubbed, forced his cries out of him.

"You're so tight—relax already."

Wrinkles lined Kobayakawa's forehead as he strained to thrust his hips upward. The pressure gave rise to an intense gratification. The sensation streaked out to his fingertips, filling his body with a sweet dullness, exciting Sawa more than he ever would have believed possible.

"Ah—ahh!"

The shock of having such a narrow place spread open bent Sawa's spine into an arch. But that only drove the penetration deeper.

"That's good—you're squeezing so hard it almost hurts." Kobayakawa's voice was higher than usual, exciting Sawa even more. "Now squeeze harder. Like you're gonna rip it right off my body. Do that for me, and I'll put it anywhere you want."

"Ah—nngh—yes—"

Sawa was in an unstable position, one leg up in the air, when Kobayakawa drove into him forcefully. The inner surfaces of Sawa's body clung to him and were dragged back, falling further and further under the sway of Kobayakawa's passion.

The penetration had ripened Sawa, transforming into a delirious pleasure and coursing through his entire body.

"Ah! No!"

With every corner of his body filled by Kobayakawa's love, Sawa wished he could melt away. He wanted to become pure love and to give Kobayakawa everything; this man that Sawa had never stopped thinking about. Their feelings, which neither of them had been able to forget for eight years, had finally become a solid bond, suffusing both their bodies.

No matter how often they came together, there had always been something that remained unsaid. But it was coming through now.

Sawa was staking everything on this one moment so that they would never have to regret anything again,

so that they would never betray each other again.

“Uzuki—!”

“Get ready—”

As his rhythm grew wilder, Kobayakawa brought his lips close to Sawa’s earlobe.

“Because I’m never letting you go again.”

His hot breath suffused Sawa’s entire body.

“Even if you refuse me—your life and your love belong to me.”

His voice seized Sawa’s heart in a steely grip, wrapping him up in the emotions it implied.

“And my life and my love—they belong to you.”

Until he’d met Kobayakawa, Sawa’s life had been unexceptional. But now that he’d met him, Sawa could never go back to that ordinary life.

This man had changed his life. He was willing to risk everything in his life to love him.

Sawa knew there was truth in the pleasure coursing through him. In the instant that Sawa released himself to his pleasure and began his fall into unconsciousness, he knew it.



Not Even God Himself

He felt as if he were drowning in warmth.

Everything had become dreamlike. He remembered the first time they had come together.

Just tangling their fingers together, his body shook. Just feeling his breath, pleasure shot straight to the back of his brain. He couldn't even describe the sensation of kissing, of each touching the other's penis.

Running his palm over the skin of Sawa's entire body, he excited him, and grew more excited, as well.

Still lost in his dream, the climax passed over him. He released it in the space of a thought.

Reassuring himself of the presence of Junya Sawa in his arms, Uzuki Kobayakawa let out an impassioned sigh. He thought it must be a dream. But the solid weight and heat of Sawa's body told him that this was real.

"Uzuki—"

Glistening with sweat, his chest reflected the fluorescent light. This was nothing like it had been in high school. They had still been immature then. They were the same age, but Sawa's body had been far slimmer than Uzuki's and looked more delicate.

But the body he held in his arms was unmistakably masculine.

It was because they were both men that Kobayakawa felt so tender toward him. Sawa's eyes turned to look

straight up at him, catching him by surprise, and all too soon he was caught in their spell.

Kobayakawa had had nothing eight years ago. Neither a way to protect his beloved Sawa, nor the power to run away with him, nor anything else. And so his beloved Sawa had been forced to lie to him.

It had been blindingly obvious that Sawa was lying to him. He was one of those people who couldn't tell lies. The more desperate he became, the more clearly Kobayakawa saw the truth in his eyes and face. He saw how much he loved him, how much he cared for him. In Sawa's abuse, Kobayakawa heard only a declaration of love.

Each word of Sawa's emotions that he heard frustrated Kobayakawa with his own powerlessness. He couldn't protect the first man who had ever loved him and recognized him for who he was. Unless he overcame his weakness, it would always be that way.

He wasn't sure he would ever see Sawa again after that, but if he did, he never wanted to let him go again. He decided to become strong enough that he wouldn't have to.

Eight years later, long enough to have given up, Kobayakawa was reunited with Sawa once again.

Kobayakawa wasn't religious, and he didn't really believe in the supernatural. Steeped in the world of the yakuza since his childhood, it was pretty much inevitable. But when he saw Sawa, in his bar in Shinjuku of all places, the coincidence had shocked him, and he awoke to the presence of God.

But he had been patient. It was a stroke of good

luck for him, but Sawa might have seen it differently. If Sawa didn't want to see him again, Kobayakawa couldn't force him to then.

So he gave Sawa a break and a chance. There was no avoiding the fact that Kobayakawa was a yakuza, so Sawa would need to be fully prepared to be with him. At the same time, Kobayakawa decided to reassure himself about his own feelings and find out whether they had changed or not from eight years before.

But whatever Sawa felt, Kobayakawa knew his own feelings immediately.

Just seeing his face, Kobayakawa had felt a shock strong enough to stop his heart. If he touched Sawa, he'd never be able to let him go again. He knew he might end up harassing him, but he couldn't stop himself. And then when they ran into each other again at the hotel, Sawa could have run away, but he didn't. Kobayakawa was lost.

He didn't know how many times they'd slept together since then. But every time they did, his feelings for Sawa pierced him.

Sawa's hard muscles had forced Kobayakawa to accept that the person he held in his arms was a man.

This was a man who had planted both his feet on the ground and stood tall on his own. He was independent financially and emotionally. This was not the Sawa of the past. He was an adult man, capable of distinguishing between good and evil. He held his own value system and he had chosen to be in Kobayakawa's arms.

The road ahead of them would not be an easy one. It would probably be rocky, in fact, but Sawa had

chosen to walk it with him. And the moment that Sawa had chosen to be with him, Kobayakawa decided that he would protect him no matter what. Being the subject of unconditional love only strengthened his own feelings.

Kobayakawa didn't need anything else. All he wanted was Sawa's love. To love and to be loved: that made him stronger, and it also made him happier.

He had believed this love to be lost once already, so his feelings were even stronger now. He would never let it go again. Even if Sawa told him to leave, he wouldn't listen this time.

"Uzuki—"

An impatient voice rolled over Sawa's lips. They had done it several times already, but his lust knew no end. He couldn't ignore the sight of his organ, in plain sight between their bellies. An unselfconscious laugh bubbled out of Kobayakawa.

Despite their rare luck, there was nothing at all romantic about this scene. The spare room of this cheap cabaret stank of mold, and outside the window he could see the neon lights of Kabuki-cho. There was no fluffy bed, no expensive wine. But right now, there was no better place imaginable for the two of them.

Kabuki-cho was where Kobayakawa lived. He wanted Sawa to understand it better. Since Sawa had led such a normal life, he had probably only skirted the edges of this world. But once he set foot in it, he wouldn't be able to get back out easily. It was a lot like their relationship, Kobayakawa realized.

"Ah!"

He ran his hand gently over it, and Sawa's body

twisted. He gasped, his forehead wrinkling as he threw his head back. His expression fascinated Kobayakawa. It made it obvious how much he liked it. Sawa was already aroused, and a sticky fluid welled up from the tip of his member and dripped onto Kobayakawa's hand.

It was pulsing quicker, Sawa's hips bouncing obscenely, pushing against Kobayakawa, telling him that this stimulation wasn't enough. Sawa was shameless. He knew that they had no better way to communicate their feelings than sex.

Eight years ago, after Sawa left, sex was nothing more to Kobayakawa than a way to release his lust. But since they had been reunited, he remembered that it could also be a way to communicate love. His skin could communicate feelings that he couldn't talk about any other way.

At times, sex could even be an act of violence. Sawa had tried hard to accept it in all its forms. When Kobayakawa saw Sawa's face filled with agony, he couldn't help but be excited. He wanted to be gentle with him, but he was driven by some impulse to find out just how much he could take.

Kobayakawa pressed him gradually, not giving Sawa what he wanted right away. His fingers, wet with Sawa's fluids, moved behind him, but they avoided the center and only played around the edges.

Massaging the two mounds gently, Kobayakawa caressed him from his inner thighs to the very edge of his opening. The feeling his fingers absorbed from Sawa's skin inexplicably aroused masochistic feelings inside him.

"Ah—"

Sawa swung his head back and forth, as if it was too much for him to bear. Kobayakawa wanted to see his face and moved his finger harder. Sawa's eyes widened and he stared down at Kobayakawa.

"I don't want to do it alone," he said in a husky voice. "I want you, too."

His hands flailed through the air and landed on Kobayakawa's member, which was already raging. Just the feeling of warmth from Sawa's fingertips penetrated Kobayakawa's body powerfully. His heart was pounding in his chest, so loud he thought he could hear it. But he tried to hold on a little longer. He wanted to hold on until the very end and only let go once he had fully satisfied Sawa.

But despite that, his lower body had already swollen selfishly to its full hardness. Like Sawa, fluid was welling up from him.

"Hurry—I want you, Uzuki!"

Sawa spoke his name in such a passionate whisper that Kobayakawa felt his temperature rise. It had been a long time since he'd felt such excitement that his body no longer felt like his own.

"Damn it—"

He berated himself for his lack of restraint and held Sawa's right thigh. Then, in one thrust, Kobayakawa penetrated him.

"Ahh!"

Spurred on by his high-pitched scream, the constricting muscles of Sawa's inner walls hurt Kobayakawa, but it only excited him further. Sawa's

body resisted him for an instant, but Kobayakawa knew that he was being worn away by his own passion. He gritted his teeth against the impulse to climax that swelled urgently within him and pounded his hips against him.

"Ah—nngh!"

Strength came into the arms around his neck. Sawa sought Kobayakawa's lips out, stretching painfully, and violently kissed him. Their tongues knotted together all the way to their roots, and they licked the insides of each other's mouths.

Probing the roof of Sawa's mouth with the pointed tip of his tongue, an ardent breath escaped through his nose.

That part of him sunk inside Sawa was being tightly squeezed, the sensation coursing through his body. He grunted, but it was too late. Kobayakawa clung to Sawa's lips with his own and jerked his hips violently.

"U—Uzu—Uzuki—"

In the tiny crack that separated their lips, Sawa repeated Kobayakawa's name desperately. His arms slipped down from Kobayakawa's neck and trailed over his back. Kobayakawa's trembled, constantly threatening to collapse. He held Sawa's hips and pushed him hard against the wall, pinning him against it with his weight.

"N—no!"

Making these meaningless cries, Sawa accepted the invader inside, wrapped around him, and squeezed tight.

"You don't mean that, do you? That's not a very nice thing to say when you're squeezing me this hard."

Kobayakawa tried to sound taunting, but he didn't have any energy to spare. Sawa was holding him so tightly that it hurt to pull out. A maddening pleasure passed through him.

"Uzuki—"

Sawa's eyes begged him, lustrous with desire, and Kobayakawa thrust exceptionally hard. Sawa let out a short cry and, at the same moment, assaulted Kobayakawa with even tighter squeezes than before. The part of Sawa pinned between their stomachs exploded and, as if inspired by his example, Kobayakawa ejaculated inside Sawa.

"Junya—" Kobayakawa pronounced his name in a feeble whisper, releasing every last drop into Sawa's body.

The almost violent accomplishment spread through Kobayakawa's body, but he realized that he wasn't getting any softer.

"Uzuki," Sawa said in a vanishingly small voice. Kobayakawa gently brought his lips to Sawa's forehead, his breathing rough, and gave him a tiny kiss.

"Was it hard?"

Sawa only hesitated for a moment at the question, then shook his head slightly. "I want more..."

"You know what's going to happen if you tell me that, don't you?" Kobayakawa looked at him in surprise. Sawa smirked, gripping Kobayakawa's arms tightly and pressing his forehead against his broad chest.

"I know. I know. And I want to be with you." His

voice was quiet, but it was clear. Sawa's body hid a powerful masculinity.

Kobayakawa's joy brought tears to his eyes. Sawa knew who Kobayakawa was, and he would try to love him, recognize him, and understand him. Their positions and lifestyles were different, but Sawa said he would stay.

He was different even from Iwatsuki, who had been with him since he was a child. And he was different from the women he'd spent his nights with. And he was different from the Sawa of the past that they had both tried to escape.

"I just want to make sure one more time."

He stroked Sawa's cheek. Feeling the heat of him on his palm, Kobayakawa reassured himself of Sawa's existence. His lust was still inside Sawa and the sensation of being gradually pulled inward made Kobayakawa feel slightly dizzy, but a fractional calm was returning to him as well.

"Make sure of what?"

"Your feelings."

Sawa frowned slightly at Kobayakawa's request.

"I know you're just going to get mad and tell me not to ask so often, but I hope you understand why I want to make sure just one more time."

"I'm not mad." Sawa just looked a little disappointed.

"I love you. Really," Kobayakawa said.

"I know."

"I would do anything for you. I would give you my life, if you asked for it. So can I ask you to trust me with yours?"

"Yeah." Kobayakawa sensed the slightest hesitation before Sawa nodded.

"I can't always be with you, you know. I'm going to protect you as much as I can, but you're going to have to trust me. If you trust me with your life, I'll protect you no matter what."

The days of bloodshed wouldn't continue forever. But the world Kobayakawa lived in was not a peaceful one. He never knew when his life would be in danger. There were so many live wires waiting to go off. This latest killing was a good example. A man who thought he would never die had died, and easily. There hadn't been any battles active at the time, but he had passed away anyway.

Kobayakawa was afraid that Sawa was still living with his "ordinary" sensibilities.

If Sawa stayed close, Kobayakawa could still protect him if something happened. Or better yet, he thought, Sawa could quit his job and come stay with him. But Kobayakawa knew Sawa would never agree to that; just suggesting it would hurt his pride.

But his was not a world where the general rules applied.

Sawa said he understood that, but he could only understand it once he was plunged into the terror for real. It wasn't just a question of laws. There was a world that Sawa couldn't even begin to imagine flourishing out there.

A time would come when Sawa's life would be in danger. Kobayakawa wanted to take charge of Sawa's life in order to protect him.

"I trust you with it." Sawa slowly raised his eyes to meet Kobayakawa's. "I trust you with everything. My life, my body, my soul. Everything."

"You really mean it, don't you?"

"I really do."

Sawa's hand traced slowly over Kobayakawa's cheek. His soft skin felt so reassuring. Kobayakawa felt like this security might reawaken memories of his childhood. He had no memories of his mother stroking him, but he was sure that when she'd cradled him, it had felt like this.

That was how Sawa had permeated Kobayakawa's existence. He had embraced the existence of Uzuki Kobayakawa the individual, without regard for good or evil, and was healing him with tenderness.

This was what it felt like to be loved. This is what it felt like to love. Kobayakawa was sure he never would have felt these things without Sawa.

"Meeting you has made me discover who I am, Uzuki." They exchanged a quick kiss before Sawa went on. "No matter what might happen in the rest of my life, I'll never lose sight of who I am. So don't worry. I'll be happy as long as you follow the path you want to. I'll always be with you."

Sawa stared straight up at Kobayakawa as he made this powerful declaration.

"I won't be surprised no matter what happens. I've decided to do everything I can to understand you, Uzuki. So—"

Sawa's words dropped off. Or rather, it would be more correct to say that he could not continue.

"Uzuki." He gazed up at him. "I can't help it. It's just a natural reaction."

"Don't you think it's a bad idea to swear to do something for the rest of your life?"

"Are you going to lecture me about bad ideas when we're standing here like this?"

Kobayakawa was still inside Sawa as they talked. But they were still tense, neither of them completely limp yet.

"If you want to have a serious discussion, get out of my body first."

Kobayakawa wanted to say something to that, but nothing came to him, so he thrust his hips hard.

"No fair, Uzuki—"

"I know you're not going to try and call me unfair."

Sawa was excited instantly. Kobayakawa tried to tease him, but he had already lost his interest in it. He still hadn't had enough. He wanted more, more, more.

But Kobayakawa had felt that he wouldn't be able to go on if he hadn't reassured himself first.

"Uzuki—"

"It's okay. I'm sure."

"You mean—you—ah!"

He didn't need to say anything else.

Even if he couldn't trust anyone else, he could always trust Sawa. And conversely, Sawa would always trust him. Now that he had found something more precious than his own life, there was nothing that he feared except for Sawa's safety.

Happiness spread through Kobayakawa's entire body.

As he played with Sawa, he pulled in and out of him rapidly. Sawa's expression showed that he was quickly flooded again with ecstasy. As Kobayakawa again tasted his tender squeezes, he too felt the same pleasure.

His pleasure was Sawa's pleasure, and Sawa's pain was his pain. No one would be able to tear them apart ever again. Not even the God who had brought them back together.

"Uzuki—!"

Sawa squeezed his eyes tightly shut, shaking his hips wildly, begging for the pleasure to penetrate his entire body.

"I'm—I'm coming! I can't—hold it—"

"Me, too. Junya, we're coming together—"

"I love you—Uzuki—"

The climax washed over them simultaneously.

Sawa's confession, sworn with his arms locked around Kobayakawa's neck, filled his heart. Kobayakawa had never heard anything like it in his entire life.

All I need is love, Kobayakawa thought, from the very bottom of his heart.

Postscript

This story, *All You Need is Love*, was supposed to be my first foray into gangster stories. I say “supposed to be,” because if you look past the surface, it’s a high school story dressed up like a gangster story.

Reading it over again, I realized that immediately.

But thanks to all of you I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to write a second volume. I urge any of you who are anxious about what happens next to pick up the next volume. I think that that one is a bit more gangster-ish than this one was. Only a very little bit, I’m sorry to say, but I’m making progress.

I’m planning to write the third volume early next year, and that one will be even more about gangsters. I’m pretty sure the story of Sawa and Uzuki will wrap up in that one, so I kind of hope that I’ll be able to proudly proclaim it to be a real gangster story.

My favorite character in the story is Iwatsuki. I sometimes get asked who Iwatsuki is involved with. Who do you think?

I didn’t think of a very sexy set-up for him, other than the fact that he’s a very old-fashioned person. I imagined Iwatsuki as being a pretty scary guy when Uzuki’s father took him under his wing. Not the

womanizing type: the strong-willed young thug. I imagined that once something set him off, nothing could calm him back down.

In a way, he kind of resembles Uzuki, I guess. But of course, I would never suggest that the current Iwatsuki is like him at all. But since he was like a father to Uzuki, it's pretty natural that they would end up resembling each other.

I've played around with the idea of writing a nice story about Iwatsuki sometime, but I get the feeling that it's better off just staying an idea.

I wrote a (very) short story for the novel's reissue. To be honest, after the book was first released readers told me that they thought pages were missing from the book, probably because of the way I ended the story. I thought it was a great ending, but I read it again and decided that I could write more about what happened afterward. And that's what you have here.

I didn't think that Uzuki's perspective would advance the story overall, but sometimes it's good to try stories like that, too.

I thought that if I wrote too much he would get too wimpy, so I left it at this. But if I get another chance, I think it might be fun to write from Uzuki's perspective again.

To Noboru Takatsuki, the illustrator: I look forward to working with you again in the next book.

To Hayazawa, my editor: thank you for giving me so much of your time when you were already so busy. I look forward to working with you again.

And to everyone who chose to read this book: thank you. I hope you'll come back again to make sure Uzuki and Junya are still doing all right.

Perhaps we'll meet again.

Sincerely,

Jinko Fuyuno

Pollen Season, 2005

I FEEL SO BAD ABOUT WHAT HORRIBLE DRAWINGS
I DID FOR SUCH A WONDERFUL STORY. (CRY)
I HOPE YOU SKIP THE PICTURES WHILE YOU READ.
I'M ECSTATIC THAT I GOT TO WORK WITH MISS FUYUNO!
(EVEN THOUGH IT WAS REALLY STRESSFUL.)

NOBORU TAKATSUKI

A CERTAIN DAY WHEN THE AUTUMN WINDS SEEM FORLORN, 2003

OUR BOYS AT THE BALL
GAME EXPOSITION

I
DON'T
WANT
TO DO
THIS.